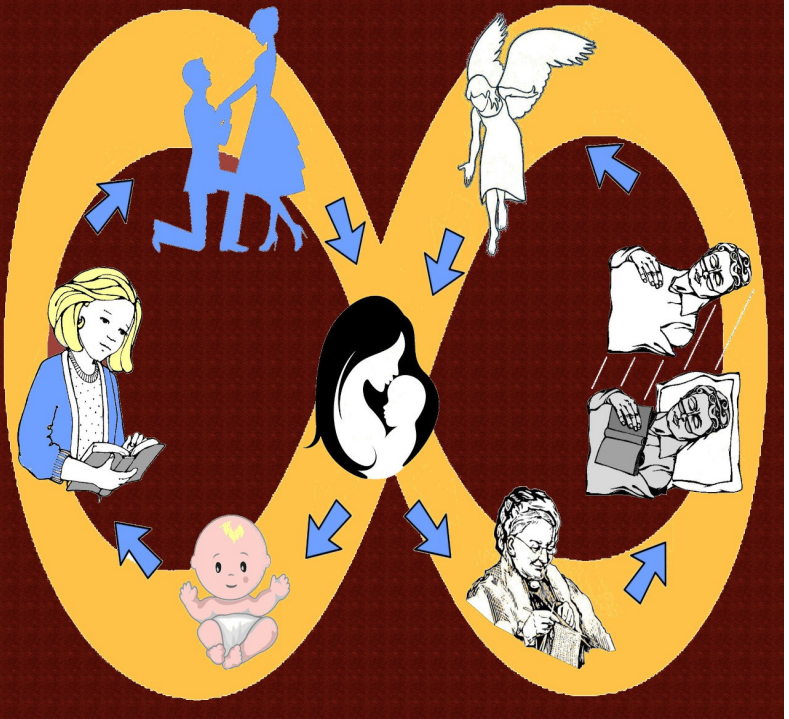
LIFE: UNBORN DEATH



Six Variations on a Theme

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LIFE : UNBORN DEATH

Six Variations on a Theme

by

Jason Ogilvy

LIFE: UNBORN DEATH

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LIFE ONE

THE NUMBER 33

PROLOGUE

Peter Patter had an unlucky name. However, luckily, by way of some cosmic compensation, he also had a lucky number. His lucky number was, and had always been, three. He woke in the dark, long before the alarm, one particular day, and the

clock said **03:03** in shining red numerals.

"Wow," thought Peter behind his sleepy eyes. "This is going to be a special lucky three day. Yes, but of course..."

He turned on the light above his bed and squinted at the calendar on the wall. It said Wednesday, the third of March. Third day of the week and third day of the third month. How much more luck could he wish for? He quickly affirmed to himself that he absolutely would definitely speak to her today. There was a girl in his workplace that had mesmerised Peter. She was trim and neat and petite and he adored her, but he didn't know how to approach her. His social skills were, as defined by himself to himself, "running the whole gamut from gauche to inept."

He turned off the light and lay back down. He couldn't sleep though, his thoughts kept him awake in the dark. Perhaps, he could "accidentally" drop a file as he passed by her desk, and start a conversation as he picked up the papers. Or wait for her to leave at lunch time and "co-incidentally" also be leaving and walk with her out the door. Then, suddenly, the alarm rang and he knew that he must have finally slept.

Shower, breakfast, teeth, dress, look at the newspaper headlines and out the door. At the bus-stop it was a number thirty-three that came first. As Peter got on, he couldn't miss the significance, this was his day. Thirty-three had been the number of his P.E. kit at junior school. Thirty-three is so much more of a three than double three, which is just

three plus three or six, or three squared, which is three times three or nine or even three cubed which is only twenty-seven. No, thirty-three is a good, healthy double dose of three-ness. Down to the town centre and a short walk to work. She wasn't in yet as he passed by her desk at the front. It had a number on it, on a small metal disc, like all the desks and workstations. Hers was number 3.

"There," he thought, "And mine is 33." How perfect the universe is, in its attention to the finest of detail.

At lunchtime he was awkwardly delayed at his desk by the boss and she was already gone when he passed by her position. He went out into the High Street and found some lunch. It was a wonderfully warm and sunny day for early March as he ate alone in a small park, created in a space where no shop had been built.

On his way back down the busy High Street he thought he caught sight of her amongst the pedestrians on his side of the road. He stopped, on tiptoe, hoping for another sighting, but she was gone. Into one of the fashion shops, perhaps? But then a squealing of locked brakes and tyres burning on the tarmac invaded his consciousness, invalidating and dissolving his thoughts...

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Selene, pronounced Se*lee*nee, had a confidence,

competence and composure, considering her youth, which most young men found dampening, more than a little threatening to their, as yet, fragile masculinity. Not that silly, little nuisance in the office, however. He didn't appear to have enough sense to be able to perceive such qualities. All he could see was her natural attractiveness and charm and not, at all, her desperate attempts not to have to make him feel small, eventually.

There he was now, not fifty yards in front, heading straight for her through the lunchtime bustle. Instinctively, although quite uncharacteristically, she quickly twisted and skipped lightly into the road to escape to the pavement on the other side. Her heel gave way and, as she tried to recover her balance as she tumbled, she heard a loud squealing behind her, and while spinning on her remaining heel had her first sight of the bus. It was bearing down on her, on top of her, towering over her like a huge, bright red cliff. There was no time for evasive action or even regret. Before it struck her, above the pallid, horrified face of the driver, in the little square window, Selene could clearly see its number. It was a number 33.

“The same as the number on his desk, so there really was no escape,” she thought, pointlessly, amid the screeching noises that so violently and so violatingly enveloped her.

PART 1

Darkness. Total. Universal. That was all. Selene was well aware, however, that she was awake, she was quite conscious. It must, she thought, be night-time, hours since her accident, because there was nothing at all visible to her. But, then, on consideration, not even nothing exactly. The necessary rudiments of vision somehow evaded her. She didn't feel able to turn her head, or even her eyes, to look about. She appeared to have lost all control of them. She thought of blinking, to clear her sight, but how was that done? She was surrounded by a uniform, unbroken blackness, a lack of even the smallest speck of light or slightest shading of colour. Could this, indeed, be considered seeing? Were her eyes open or closed? And without her sense of vision as a yardstick, there was no sense of distance. The blackness could have been stretching infinitely far away from her or stuck tight against her nose. She had no way of knowing which. It reminded her of a time, when potholing in North Devon, she had turned off her head-light momentarily, and all realisation of space had disappeared. Then the absolute, subterranean night had been stuck tightly against her face, as if space itself had departed with the light.

She hadn't lost any of her memory, though. She remembered the rush of her morning's paperwork and her lunch, consumed on foot, while gazing absent-mindedly at shop windows. She could even remember the park bench where she had used to eat her lunch, weather permitting, before it had been requisitioned by that silly boy from the office, who vainly hoped to slip in a few puerile words to her. Then, of course, she couldn't forget the bus towering over her. It must have hit her, it was too close not to have done. But then what? Could she be in hospital? Or could she be dead? Or maybe just blinded by the impact?

Then again, there were no sounds either, just a complete and utter silence. How could that be possible? There was always some background noise, some machine, some voice, some distant animal or a creaking floorboard. So, did that mean she was left deaf from the accident, as well as blind? Had her eardrums been ruptured by the force of the collision?

Selene didn't take long to realise that she also had no pain, or any other sense of feeling, come to that. Could that fact reveal the answer to the mystery? Perhaps she was doped up with morphine. Given so much that she was trapped inside this chemical limbo, locked away from all the usual bodily sensations and awarenesses of life. Selene knew something about morphine. She had visited her old Divinities teacher, Miss Brahms, in the hospice. No, it didn't hurt, had said Miss Brahms, they control the pain with morphine. No, she wasn't afraid, because what was coming to her comes to all

of us in the end, it's just part of life's rich tapestry. We are all given just one gift at our birth, and that is our death. When or how it will be unwrapped for us we do not know, but it will be, in the end. As for the big WHY of life, what can we know? Imagine a red blood cell, lets call her Freda. She spends her whole life flowing through our arteries and veins. Sometimes it is summer and she feels happy and full of energy, at other times it is cold and she feels the goodness being drawn out of her, but then, at last, summer comes again. Could we hope to explain to Freda that she is going round and round like that so that we can be properly educated in order to land a decent job in an office to pay the mortgage or holiday abroad each year? Where would we begin? In the same way, those powers which are above and beyond us cannot explain to us why we do what we do. They give us our religion as a pointer, but it cannot reveal anything like the full story. That visit had had a profound effect on the young Selene. It was five days later that Miss Brahms' death was reported with sadness at assembly. However, back to the present...

Even beyond morphine, imagine, having had to be put into a medically induced coma while her organism recovered from the profound shock of the impact. Or, maybe, she was just covered with bandages, like an Egyptian mummy, and that would explain why everything was so dark and quiet. But the blackness and silence had an absolute quality that seemed to go far beyond the simplistic explanation of eye-pads and enveloping bandages. Unless it was night, of course, with curtains drawn

and lights turned down. Hence no sound either from the scaled-down night-time routine. Unless, she was dead and buried, of course. That would also explain her condition. No sound there either, nor light, screwed down in a box with six feet of earth thrown on top of it.

What about her poor parents? She hadn't even had time to wish them a proper goodbye. They would have been crushed under the reality of her premature death, having to sit through the service in the chapel and then stand at the graveside while their only daughter's coffin was lowered into the deep, dark, silent hole. What an added dread it would be for them if they suspected that she had not been taken from life, but that her life had been taken from her and that she was left still conscious but without life? What a state to be in. Could this possibly go on for ever?

Think! What were the probabilities? She was either alive or dead, but however that part of the problem resolved itself, she was conscious, aware of the passage of time, and quiet ably able to remember past incidents and people. Thinking back, she could easily remember, with love, her doting parents, the friends and teachers of her schooldays, when she had been referred to as "composed and competent," and the headmistress' summing up of her that was "both bright and polite and always smartly turned out." Nothing extra had been lost from those memories of the past, it seemed. Not that they were any sharper either, as some religionists claimed. She definitely did not seem to be undergoing the process of having the

whole of her short life squashed down into a karmic mantra in some soul-searching psychic revelation, good or bad.

It was only with the "now" that she really had a problem. Not even the now exactly, because the now was a point endlessly moving along the stream of time. This now, as she thought of it, was not the same now as that when she had first become aware in the blackness. Time had passed between them, had flowed on, they were of two different times, each happily calling itself "now" in its own time. No, even the now wasn't the real problem.

Clearly then, sensory perception was at the root of her problem. There just wasn't any. Not a scrap of it. No sight, no hearing, no smell, no taste and no feeling, she stopped to check, no – nothing. All five senses of her biology lessons were absent, either on holiday or "compassionate leave." No perception of any sort or degree had come to her since she had regained consciousness after the accident. She had no awareness of her breathing. Was it shallow or laboured, or even assisted by some mechanical pump? Could she be intubated? Then again, she could feel no throbbing of her pulse anywhere in her body. Surely she should have, at least, a thumping headache after the collision? Nor could she hear those little hisses and ringings and hummings that hang around the ears when everything else falls silent. Also she was totally devoid of pain or discomfort – surely some little niggle should always be somewhere? After such a bang as she imagined she must have received, a lot more than a niggle might well have been expected.

Proprioception was gone as well. That feedback sense that tells us a limb is where it is, without our having to see it. She had no idea where her limbs were now or even if they were at all. Was she a multiple amputee? Also no intimations of balance came to her. Was she lying flat, sitting down, standing up or on her head? No clue came to aid her wondering. What about temperature? Was she hot or cold or like Baby Bear's porridge, just right? Was she being kept stable in an air-conditioned environment or just chilled on a slab in the morgue?

She was squeezing her mind and her thoughts were entering a loop, now. It can only be morphine that would be capable of totally knocking out the sensational world to such an utter degree. The only trouble with that theory was that morphine at such levels, surely obliterates consciousness as well. Perhaps the impact broke her neck and so she lost all sensations from her body, but then what about the major senses located in the head? Perhaps, she was dead, then, after all. The Ancient Greek afterlife of Hades was supposed to be pretty dim, but the dwellers appeared to be able to talk to each other down there, and she had nobody. As for the Christian Heaven or Hell, or even the Catholic Purgatory, this vacant state just didn't meet the criteria. No singing angels, no torturing daemons and no stones to endlessly push uphill.

Could this be a punishment? Selene didn't feel she had committed any major sins. Stupidly fell in front of a bus was, of course, one possibility. Killed a few flies bothering her cooking. Ignored that silly boy in the office, but even that was only to save him

from realising her true opinion of his utter daftness. Perhaps they were not sins of commission but sins of omission. She didn't become a nurse, as she had wanted, to help unfortunate people, because the employment officer had told her she was over-qualified. She never went to the Third-World as a volunteer missionary either, as she had once fleetingly fancied she should. But could these be mortal sins?

Eventually, she stopped going round the circle of I'm alive... I'm dead... I'm alive... I'm dead. “I think therefore, I am,” said René Descartes, the French Philosopher. But, as he was thinking that break-through thought before writing it down, surely he also felt his chair under him, saw the paper before him on the writing bureau with the quill next to it and clearly heard and smelled the everyday life of Amsterdam going on outside his window? Selene felt, saw and heard none of this or its local equivalents. She had to concede that she was still thinking, therefore she was still being, but in what state she was being was a bit more difficult to answer. It was a real conundrum.

Then she returned to one of her previous ideas. Surely, the only condition that could fit this bill was that she was in a coma. Cut off completely from her bodily sensations and thus from any touch with the outside world. Adrift in some internal nowhere. After all, somebody in a coma looks as if their mind has gone elsewhere. This state she was in could, with ease, be defined as that of being elsewhere. A state of having absolutely no sensory perception yet still be alive. However, when people came out of a

coma, they never reported having lived through time in total blackness and silence. Relatives would even be encouraged to gather round the bed and talk to people in a coma as it was supposed to help them come out of it. But, then, could it be that the memory of the conscious isolation is itself isolated in a “psychic cyst” as the links to the real world are reconnected and normal service is resumed on awakening? Just as dreams dissolve and are forgotten when we arise from sleep?

Anyway, as a working hypothesis, it would have to do. Like Sherlock Holmes would say, “when you have discounted everything else...” She was undoubtedly hit by the bus, received a cluster of varying internal injuries and was either knocked into a coma by the force of the impact or was medically induced into one to reduce the shock to her psyche.

For all that, the blackness and silence didn't, however, weigh down upon Selene. It was just there, if she chose to notice it. She didn't feel trapped, or feel the need to work herself up into a fit of righteous indignation over its effrontery. Not that she actually had anything to throw a fit with in her present state. What would have happened after the accident? Hospital? Her poor parents must be waiting, frantic, at her bedside. That silly boy who was approaching her must have seen it all, or her colleagues would have come out of the office with the commotion and said who she was, or the police would have found her particulars in her handbag and contacted her family straight away.

How long she would have to stay like this she

couldn't begin to imagine. She even had no way of knowing if her sense of the passage of time as she was feeling it, was the same as the passage of time in that world so recently, if indeed it was recently, vacated. Each second of her experience now, could be like a minute or an hour in the real world. Or, conversely, even just a millisecond, and she could stay for lifetimes in this cut-off state as only days passed in reality. To her mind, only about an hour had so far passed like this. Could she really stay like this for a week? Then again, what choice did she have? What do prisoners do? They put up with it, but for most of them they know it will have an end, eventually, at worst with their deaths inside. Even then, some go "stir-crazy." Was such coming to her? She didn't feel inclined to go coma-crazy, not just yet, anyway.

Thinking about the possible change in the perception of time, gave her another idea. Humming birds have a very different sense of time to us, because they move so quickly, yet in their own time their motions must feel much like ours do to us. She had read that their heart rate can be 1200 beats per minute while hovering, about twelve times faster than ours under the equivalent level of exercise. So it would seem likely that their consciousness is twelve times faster than ours to cope with the split-second decisions that they must make in flight. Insects, such as houseflies, must be even faster. As consciousness is capable of "ticking over" or "clocking" at such heightened speeds, it could be argued that she was still living in those moments of the shock of the impact at vastly

increased speed, unable to receive messages from her senses, because her physical nervous system was too slow to be able to impinge upon her galloping consciousness. So perhaps, this was the time when one's life flashes before one's eyes, perhaps all this thinking was that flashing of her life. She had thought of her school days, thought of her family and thought of the morning of her accident. If so, Selene just had to accept that she hadn't managed to gather up enough life to create a more organised, stereotypical flash.

Either way, coma or hyper-consciousness, everything remained absolutely dark and silent. Of course, there was the other major division of possibility, that she was just simply dead. Hit by the bus with such force that her truncated life was knocked well and truly out of her young body. In that case, what kind of death state could this be? It didn't measure up to classical Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory, but then not even Annihilation, with which the Jehovah Witnesses had once threatened her on her doorstep. Annihilation implied the complete destruction of consciousness and being, not the complete destruction of everything except consciousness and being. This was more like anti-annihilation. She was not able to recall ever hearing of the possibility of a state of existence without anything else. Just to be, and only to be, and perhaps never to not be, ever. Without another, not even a body. No God or Master to control things. No tormentor, or Devil, or daemons to make her suffer. No mate, or friend, or companion to share her existence with. Not even some hurriedly

pencilled-in surroundings to exist in. No environment at all. Nothing. Total nothingness. Nothing else, just her, completely Otherless. A disembodied intellect, existing in nowhere-land. This definition triggered an idea within Selene, then. That must have been how God was before He created the Universe. He needed somebody else or something else to interact with. Therefore, He split off part of Himself and turned it into the Universe, the Only-begotten, as it's called in Plato's Timaeus. But Selene, on the other hand, didn't consider that she could find enough self-substance to split. She was only consciousness and consciousness as a point, an indivisible point with no circumference. So where would such a split be applied? Anyway, she wasn't God.

With her chain of ideas having again run its course, Selene became quiescent. For many years she had confined her thinking to logical, verbalised thought. Whilst learning how to type, she had become accustomed, subconsciously, to typing her thoughts in her head as fast as she thought them, ticker-tape fashion. Now, with nowhere else for them to run, Selene finally quelled her thoughts, blanked her mind and just "was." It would be comforting for us to imagine that she sat quietly, or lay quietly, or even stood quietly, however, posture-less Selene just "was" – quietly. But not for long.

God had said, "Let there be light," and this simple statement had begun the creation of the World. Selene couldn't quite say it as she didn't have a mouth, but she could think of intoning it, and so think of intoning it she did - three times, in

proper ritualistic fashion. Nothing appeared to happen though - but then, of course, she still wasn't God. So Selene returned to her state of just being – quiescently – acceptingly.

At some point in time, the exact moment of which was unknowable without a timeline of events to compare with, Selene became aware that somehow, something had been disturbing her total quietude. Something foreign, a strangeness had entered upon her existence. She had a vague awareness that something was impinging upon her consciousness and once consciously noted, memory revealed that it had actually been gradually making itself felt for quite some while. She couldn't understand what it was for a long time. It didn't have the feel of a memory or a longing or some other creation of imagination, it seemed to be something actually happening, in the "now." Something that didn't appear to emanate from Selene, and that fact could only mean one thing, an "Other." She tried to concentrate on this new awareness, on this novel sensation, if it truly was one, but it was elusive. It slipped from the grasp of her consciousness so easily. She couldn't clearly fix her mind upon it. It was there... No it wasn't... It was there... No, it was just a phantom...

Very slowly, however, the doubt became a certainty. Yes, right at the edge of awareness, there was a very deep hum, a vibration pitched so low that it was only just perceivable. It made her feel as if she had an itch that needed to be scratched, like when you hear a deep note from a cathedral organ or a tuba. However, the longest of pipes on a

cathedral organ would have had difficulty in producing this note. It was pitched just below the spectrum of sound, and yet, it was definitely there soundlessly booming away. She thought for a while that it might be some bodiless version of tinnitus or the beginnings of hallucinations, like those experienced during sensory deprivation experiments, created by the subject's mind trying to fill in the hole of the lonely abyss into which it had been thrust. However, as she became more accustomed to the pitch of its vibrancy, and through the enforced, continuous practice of "listening," more able to perceive it, she became certain that within that single, intoned note was being expressed some sense of force and power and apparent presence.

Of course, if her consciousness was crazily speeded up, begging for any sensory impression from the outside world, this could be just the whine of a hospital machine operating at normal speed being massively slowed down, or even the sound of her father's voice trying to stimulate her into awakening. Even so, the longer she was exposed to it – and what else did she have? - the more she came to feel grateful for its presence. Selene imagined she could feel a warmth in it, that if it had been a colour it would have been the deepest red, like a dark maroon tending down into infra-red, a hue that could generate feelings of awe.

Paralleling this growth in the raw perception of the vibration, there began to gather a whole superstructure of other ideas in Selene's mind, in connection with it, built on the natural sense of

deference she felt for it. The vibration, or its source, didn't ask for any respect, but respect was felt to be quite naturally and simply due to it. And certainly due, without any possibility of argument. Another idea promoted by the lowness of frequency was of hugeness. This “sound” surely belonged to something so large that it dwarfed any attempt to define it. Stretching her mind, she thought that only something the size of a continent or the Pacific Ocean could begin to express its true scope.

Then again, there was the feeling of benignity. The vibration seemed to enwrap her in goodness, it cosseted and caressed her in an enfolding warmth and maternal love. There was no ill-will contained within the depth of its hum. Selene seriously considered that it may well be her own mother's voice, as she talked encouragingly to her from the hospital bedside, heard through the layers of morphine and bandages. Even, possibly, that it was that of her grandmother, who had passed away recently, having come to lead her into the afterlife, as the spiritualists say happens after death. Still, she couldn't ignore the fact that, in all honesty, neither her grandmother nor even her own mother could truthfully be represented by such an all-pervading, all-loving tone. Only, perhaps, the Virgin Mary, could so qualify.

Selene, swept away, taken beyond her personal issues of life and death, revelled in the sound, allowing it to infiltrate her mind without any thought of putting up a defence or holding back. There was a sense in which the vibration appeared to be attempting to commune with her, as if it held

some message of import for her. It seemed to "speak" to her in simple syllables as if talking lovingly to a baby. Selene had gradually become aware of faint overtones, riding on the base frequency, modifying its vibrations. The originator of these tones was, as if, sending them down to her from on high, seemingly to pass ideas to her mind that she could not consciously comprehend. It was as if some form of dialogue was being attempted.

Something that could be expressed as, "ga, ga" or "da, da," flowed tenderly down on the vibration.

Selene could not follow. It all sounded like deep humming to her. The subtle variations were lost on her. She was happy to listen to it, as, in her isolation, she felt that, at least, it represented the existence of another entity, and a kindly one at that. She regressed, thinking again that perhaps a nurse in hospital was speaking to her, as she checked and adjusted some tubes, while she was in her coma. The deep sound continued sending its syllables in overtones, patiently, making a sound and then waiting for a while before repeating it or, after many passes, switching to another slightly different syllable. Selene could not help but notice the purposeful flow of this communication. Upon the exquisitely deep fundamental note came fluttering down, like a bird, an extra complex tone, the syllable, which held for about one second, in Selene's reckoning of time, and then swept away, leaving just the base tone to be heard again. After about ten seconds the extra tone would be repeated, sometimes slightly altered. Selene began to wonder why the ten second gap should be there. Could it

possibly be the time allotted to her to recognise and remember the new vibration and begin to understand it?

Then Selene, apparently brainless as she was, had a brainwave. The gap in the transmission of syllables was left for her to respond. She was expected to answer, or if not answer at least repeat the sound. She couldn't comfortably accept the idea when it sprang into her mind, as it took her far away from any possibility of mother, grandmother or nurse, but the more she considered it, and the more she listened to the syllables, the more it seemed to be the correct one. Within these gaps she was required to repeat the sound. A sound which she could hardly hear, without having control of any part of a physical body, and so no larynx or mouth. How could she respond? She very much wanted to please this benign entity that was prepared to bother with her in her perfect isolation. "Give me the tools and I'll do the job," sprang to her mind. She just didn't have any wherewithals with which to be able to respond.

Then again, though, that thought led her onwards. She didn't actually have ears to hear the syllables with either, and yet she had become aware of them and did hear them. So, some part of her operated in this sterile, black world, giving her the function of ears of a sort. Therefore, as the presence gave all the appearance of expecting a reply, there must be some other part of her that could respond, just as if she had had the function of a mouth. What would that be? She thought hard, vainly, she had no clue, no data to work with, while the slow cascade of

syllables continued to slide past her, unanswered. Finally, with the tightening focus of her concentration reduced to a pinpoint, trying not to miss any nuance of the incoming overtones, she heard something else.

There was present, also, a tiny squeak of a noise, appearing in its comparative sharpness, to be emanating from a point relatively close to her. It lacked intensity but had a persistence, on a note which was hardly changing. A high-pitched, little whine that, once Selene had singled it out, appeared to dog her thinking in some way, to shadow her every thought. Whatever could this new thing in the blackness be? Friend or foe? Angel or daemon? It was surely extremely close, she could feel that much. As she continued to sense it through time, it was gradually revealed as actually being small and, thankfully, non-belligerent in feel, but definitely lacking the infinite goodness and magnanimity that seemed to pour forth from the depths of the Other.

Selene stopped trying to over-analyse, letting the multiplying totality of vibrations, springing from the blackness, surround her, and impinge upon her consciousness. The deep, warming sounds, sending down their strangely meaningful overtones along a curving line like the sweep of a giant pendulum enthralled her. Also there, in the mix, seemingly still close by and a constant companion, as she attuned to it, was the monotonous squeak. It could almost be represented by a form, this squeak, she felt, as she concentrated upon it. It could be sensed as if it was a self-contained shape, with no sharp corners or other dangly bits poking out. It was as if

smooth, well-rounded off – and at that point in her train of thought she managed to picture it. It was exactly rounded off - the picture came into clear focus in Selene's mind - because it was a sphere. This little squeak was a small sphere, and it was very near to her. She concentrated on it more, now that she was certain that it was a nearby sphere, trying to place its exact location in relation to herself.

Suddenly, Selene could have laughed. She could have cried. If only she hadn't lacked the necessary body parts. The central point of this little whining sphere was appearing to be right where she was. In exact co-incidence, in fact, with her own sense of position in the blackness. She was at its centre, and in that instant, with such realisation, she had no doubt that it was indeed herself. She was the little, whining sphere. It represented her body. The analogy ran on further, galloping onwards in her mind. Via this sphere she received the vibrations of the Other, and so via this sphere she ought to be able to communicate back. If the rippling surface of the sphere was sensitised to receiving vibrations and overtones from the great, red pendulum and capable of passing them to her consciousness, then this surface should be equally capable of taking responses from her and passing them outwards in some equivalent ripples back to the Other. The thought was awesome, it overwhelmed her, but she immediately accepted and adopted these new concepts, without any doubt, in absolute certainty.

Selene tried to enter consciously into the sphere. Like a hermit crab squeezing itself into a new shell.

She needed to consciously recognise it as herself, to experience that she was, in actuality, that little whining ball of vibration. That this whining was, in fact, merely the echoes of her own intellectual processes.

With all other considerations temporarily shelved, through practice, Selene managed to adopt as experience that she could indeed be its active principle and that the tiny, squeaking sounds that were in reality the vital vibrancy of the sphere were created directly from her own mentation. She began to believe it, to feel it and, in time, to be it. The ball of vibrations was just a reflection of her thoughts and moods. She feigned anger and the whining changed, she feigned puzzlement and then happiness and listened to the changing of the pitch and overtones of the sphere as these feelings entered into its make-up and swept spiralling over its surface like the colours flowing over the surface of a soap-bubble.

Selene had become a believer. There was no corner left in her mind that could harbour any secret doubt. She had to accept that whatever had happened to her, her life at this point was profoundly changed. However it had come about, her being had been mutated into a shimmering, whining ball of energy. As the I Ching says referring to the Abysmal Water, “like the water trapped in a ravine, the only path to deliverance is to flow onwards to the end.” So, in discarding any idea of passively waiting for a return to the normal world, only one route lay open before Selene. She had to manage to communicate with this vastly

larger, benign entity that she only knew as the Other.

PART 2

"Goo," came sliding down past Selene on the swing of the pendulum. She composed herself, spherically, and tried to imitate it. "Czaa," she replied, quickly thinking that she couldn't have made a worse attempt as she herself heard the result. A torrent of deep red praise and encouragement flooded down the arc from above and flowed over her and around her and ran through her, thrilling her to the core of her being. The Other had heard. Dialogue had begun. Just like when a baby utters its first sound towards its mother, a conscious link had been forged between these two entities.

Without an animal body to restrain her, Selene, had no need for sleep or rest. She was free to apply herself "whole-heartedly" to developing this new form of communication. Everything happened in overtones, higher frequencies that is, multiples of either being's fundamental tone. While trying to imitate the sounds that were sent to her, Selene

began to analyse them, and create patterns. Surprisingly, she found that the results were not dissimilar to the classifications for the analysis of a human language.

Firstly, and most importantly, were the vowel-sound equivalents, the fundamental A,E,I,O,U of speech, coming as musical tones. There were four distinct sounds. The most open, the “ah,” was a gentle sine wave sounding most like a flute. Then the next was more agitated in flow, the “eh” as the conceptual “aperture” began to close, like the triangular wave of an oboe or clarinet. Then came the rougher, fatter sounds of the “ee” of the brass section with a square wave, and finally the rasping of the sawtooth wave of the “oh” or sometimes “oo” sounding like the bowed strings of an orchestra. These four basic sounds could be pitched at different frequencies giving something of an equivalence to the the range of sounds of a modern symphony orchestra. Seen as colours, flickering along the path of the pendulum or swirling over the surface of her sphere, the most open “ah” of the flutes was the red that Selene knew so well, followed by the orange/yellow of the rest of the woodwinds and then the green of the brass section, incidentally, she mused, *brasino* in Greek means green and the oxides on brass are green, and then the blue/indigo/violet of the string section. This, however, represents Selene's concentrated analysis of what she was being taught. The lessons proceeded in a stepwise fashion via the syllables from the simplest sounds to express, upwards, each needing to be correctly heard and reproduced.

The vowel sound had modifications through time as well. It could be continuous, like an organ, or fade in volume, like a piano, or even swell like a cello. But equally important was the other half of the syllable, the consonant value which could be used to produce various hisses, whines, bursts and growls at the beginning or end of the sounds. Selene had been an intelligent girl in the real world, enjoying her studies of English and French at school and Greek with her granny. So now she worked hard to be able to distinguish and repeat the vast number of syllables being given to her, a list which ran, eventually, into many hundreds, all needing to be learned and memorised by rote, without the support of a pencil and paper to keep notes. The table of syllables she created in her mind, was full of nuances of sound, all however without meaning to her. She had no idea what "Goo" meant, or any of the other combinations. No picture or concept to aid understanding or tabulation was given with the syllables. It appeared that she was just required to know them all.

Finally, after the passage of endless, unknowable time, Selene did know them, and could repeat competently, all the syllables. With the last few complex sounds curving down to her, that is in vibrations of course not actual sounds, that she mastered, she completed the lessons of the syllabic alphabet, and the Other fell silent. All the data were held in her mind in the form of a chart, at least twice the size and complexity of the Periodic Table of Elements, and if visualised could have appeared more like an analysis of Pharaonic Egyptian or

Chinese hieroglyphs, rather than of a “spoken” language.

Such concentration on vibrational forms and their tiny differences had made Selene sensitive to vibrations across a widening range of frequencies, from the resounding, infra-red depths of the Other to the pathetic squeaks of her own responses. While, left alone, she began to double-check the lists of sounds in her mind, repeating them, one by one, to consolidate her lessons. As she trudged through them, taking care over each syllable, listening intently to the nuances that she, herself, was generating within them, she gradually became aware of other sources of vibration around her.

To begin with Selene couldn't attune to these new sources properly, but very soon she was in no doubt that other spheres such as her own were dotted around her, seemingly on a plane, at varying distances. They didn't appear to communicate with each other, or her, or the Other. Some of them were engaged in blindly swirling a variety of emotions and thought patterns across their surfaces, over and over again, as if trapped in a groove like a scratched record, whilst the actions of the remainder could not be deciphered at all. This discovery of other spheres should have been a marvel to Selene, as it seemed to show there were others like herself, but communication with them proved to be impossible. In truth each sphere in its isolated, autistic existence was a bit of a let-down, a damp squib, and she soon returned to concentrating fully on her analysis and practice of the syllables, which she found more fruitful and interesting.

New forms of vibration arose from the silence of the surrounding blackness to break her train of thought. In fact, the original emptiness was, for her, beginning to become a bit overcrowded. The newer forms were tantalisingly different in shape. They were more elliptical, possessing cores perceived as rods. Rods that appeared to radiate from their ends in curving loops around themselves like those from the school's bar magnets in Selene's physics experiments. The outer surfaces of these magnetic loops creating coloured, ellipsoidal (egg-shaped) auras that enveloped the rods, partially hiding them. What was strange at first, was that being elliptical in shape instead of circular, the auras of the rods had a dimension that the spheres lacked. Rods could be vertical or horizontal, or even as Selene realised later, bent into strange shapes, although the auras covering them hid this fact from view, initially. They also appeared to be more likely to travel around, moving in and out of her limited field of vision. Some passed through quickly and some quite slowly, revealing that this plane she had imagined they and the spheres inhabited was, in fact, more complicated than she had at first imagined, containing some internal depth of its own.

Sight being, by far, the most developed human sense, Selene had begun, instinctively, to form a mental picture from the increasing mass of vibrations she could sense. She had developed a feel for the vertical in this new, populated space and was glad to note that the syllables of the Other had swung down to her from above, as she had sensed

them at the time. She could also see, as she converted the pattern of vibrating sources into a picture that all the other elements occupied this thickened horizontal plane, which stretched away from her in all directions. The spheres and ellipsoids stayed close to this surface, which undulated freely as it spread into the distance. With some surprise, she realised that the image closely resembled a simplified view of the surface of a planet, populated by spheres and ellipsoids. This was to Selene a breakthrough. Could anything be more obvious than that the spheres, like her, were women and the ellipsoids were men? It was so clear. Surely, she was just seeing the ordinary, everyday world through some kind of sixth sense, because her normal senses had been nobbled by the accident and were no longer operating. Again the ideas of being under morphine or in a coma sprang to her mind.

However, although both forms shimmered similarly with transient colours sweeping across their surfaces, Selene found it odd that the men seen as ellipsoids should be at least three times longer than the women seen as spheres. Furthermore, that the rod, the denser nucleus, could be glimpsed inside a man, taking different postures, whereas no such equivalent nucleus showed within the sphere of a woman. Could it be that they had nuclei, which were spherical and so didn't show through the spherical bodies? Two other surprising differences also became clear to Selene as she pushed her mind into overdrive, concentrating on converting vibrations into visual images. Selene, herself, as a

sphere, was definitely larger than the other spheres, and she was also positioned on a higher level than the others, as if she were floating above the plane that held the other spheres and the ellipsoids. But then, could she be in a first or second floor room? If so, why alone? That didn't explain the size difference either, though perhaps that could be explained by some form of self-interest.

Selene allowed herself to revel in the momentary freedom from lessons, sensing all manner of vibrations that surrounded her, converting them into pictures and trying to make sense of the three dimensional panorama that they created about her. Trying to interpret the colours that she conceived flickering across the spheres and ellipsoids as the emotions, or even deeper, the attitudes or conditioned stances of their owners to the unravelling events of their lives.

Something far, far above, away from the worldly plane, caught Selene's interest. Something tinged a deep red was attracting her attention. The lessons were re-commencing. A two-syllable sound came sweeping down in an arc from the Other, followed shortly by the “loudening” of the vibrations of a sphere near to her. This apparent increase in volume, Selene was comfortably able to translate in her mind into a brightening of its colours, as if highlighting that particular sphere. The double syllable came again and a different sphere was amplified and highlighted. It came again, Selene tried to repeat it, drawing from her earlier analyses, and another sphere was indicated by being stressed. This cycle was continued until Selene, grasping

how the juxtaposition of the one syllable slightly modified the other, could make the sound perfectly.

Then the pattern of the lesson changed. A sphere was highlighted followed by a pregnant pause. Selene had understood this pregnant pause system before, so she immediately repeated the two syllable sound, and as she vibrated the word, she understood the lesson, that that two syllable word was the general name for a sphere. Quickly, another sphere lit up and she said the word, again another, she said it again. Ripples of delight within the vibrations of the Other came swirling down and across Selene and back up and away again. Selene had learned her first word.

Next came the ellipsoids that contained the radiating rods. The procedure was the same. They lit up in sequence. The word for them wasn't very different from the word for spheres, just an extra tweak of consonant throttling at the start. Selene was able to intone it quite quickly. As she compared the two vibrational forms for sphere and ellipsoid, repeating them in turn to fix them in her mind, she couldn't help but notice that the words could be easily taken as a pair as in the English “man” and “woman,” except that the extra sound was not a full syllable, just a thickening of the consonant representing the man.

Then, there was a change. Seemingly, the whole of the Other lit up around Selene, revealing the vast size of this vibrational being, a huge complex of tones which were lost to the reddening distance in all directions, and then a two-syllable word came sliding down the course of the pendulum. Then

again, the highlighting of the gigantic Other with the word, and again until Selene could imitate it correctly. Creeping into her consciousness as she repeated it was a rogue thought. This sound contained a complex vowel. It was a voiced consonant first modifying a complex vowel which then rolled into a simple one. It was strangely reminiscent of something, but what? While she was trying to recall exactly what memory was nagging at her, she lit up herself.

This had happened, Selene could now understand, because she was amplified by an extra copy of herself being added to her own vibrations, thereby doubling her in energy or intensity. So that fact explained how the spheres and rods and even the Other were highlighted. The Other was able to double them. Again she lit up, with a pregnant pause to follow. The Other, having introduced itself, was clearly asking Selene her name, but on that point she needed to think.

How could she put it? A long, hissing sibilant for the “S.” The first “E” was simple as in “bet,” but the second repeated vowel in the Greek original was a long diphthong as in “beet.” By adding approximations to the “L” and “N” sounds, she finally aimed for “Se-*leee*-nee.” She mentally practised it, until it sounded appropriate. When it couldn't have been put any better, without the support of the written word, she finally intoned it.

Then the Other spoke again. The vibrations represented something which felt friendly, followed by “Selene,” followed by a pause. Selene immediately understood it to mean “Hello, Selene”

and managed to respond after three attempts with "Hello, xxx." "XXX" being the vocalised name that the Other had offered. The Other was thrilled with the communication, and so was Selene, but that niggling memory in the back of her mind began to tickle again. The name of the Other was a voiced consonant followed by a long diphthong of sine wave and triangle wave together leading into a bare sine wave finish. It reminded her of something. Something tantalisingly appropriate. Taking the consonant as perhaps "back of the tongue" in form, as its place in the chart might have suggested in an Earthly language, she sounded them off, inwardly to herself, over and over again, comparing it with each of the sounds as she conceived them: Kighyah, Gighyah, Ghighyah, Jighyah, Ngighyah, Wighyah, and then, in her imagination, she clearly heard it. Finally, she knew that the name of the Other was nothing more nor less than Gaia, (pronounced Gúy-ah.)

Gaia, as Selene's studies had told her, was the Mother Goddess of ancient Greek mythology, representing the whole Earth as the mother to all the creatures living on it. The name had been resurrected in New Age literature, but here was a living, vibrating mother caring for the young spheres and ellipsoids in her charge with the name, as near as could be expressed, Gaia. Selene was quietly amazed and very happy now to call the Other, Gaia, and Gaia, in her turn, was very glad that her charge had such understanding, and gladly called her, Selene. The bond between them was tightening.

The next surprise came when the plane, that the spheres and ellipsoids appeared to move about on, lit up. This was the final part of the vibrational jigsaw that surrounded Selene. In this pulsating world all she knew was Gaia, herself, spheres, ellipsoids and the undulating plane. Selene was in an excited state after deciphering Gaia's name, and listened attentively for the word associated with the plane. To her amazement it sounded very similar to the words for sphere and ellipsoid. She had trouble accepting this. How could a word for the Earth or the ground sound like a modification of man or woman? The plane flashed again as Gaia repeated the word and waited for Selene's response. So Selene repeated the word, correctly but not confidently, and Gaia sensed the problem.

Gaia directed Selene, by attunement, to another part of the plane, a distant part. Suddenly Selene was there, not where she had been. The plane was more violently buckling in the new place, obscuring the vibes of many of the spheres and ellipsoids in its frozen waves. She was shown one small community in a dip, where all the “men,” the ellipsoids, were horizontal. The rods inside them were highlighted by Gaia, and all were seen by Selene in various straight or bent positions, but always level with the plane. The “women” or spheres hovered around or slightly above them appearing to move under some inner guidance. The scene shifted slightly and another valley appeared with more highlighted, horizontal rods, with more spheres in attendance or just aimlessly moving. Then again and again, always the motionless rods

were parallel to the ground, always the spheres moved randomly around. Selene was confused. Was it night there? If so, why were only the men asleep?

The scene changed again. This time Selene was surrounded by vertical towers rising squarely from the plane. On the ground, between the towers, Gaia highlighted semi-vertical rods in their ellipsoids in groups, apparently speeding through invisible channels that were criss-crossing the plane between the heights. Spheres were there as well, some following particular ellipsoids, most moving randomly about. Then, one after another, the towers were highlighted, filled with ellipsoids and attendant spheres, that hovered around, inside and out, until finally, with a cold stab of realisation, Selene got the message. The lesson was unbearably painful, but well and truly learned, in a way that would never be forgotten.

She felt a sadness for all that which was lost to her. Her parents, her mature life, her potential husband and children that she would never know.

The pulsating scene before her could belong only to Manhattan, New York. The towering blocks and the busy roads between them could be nowhere else on Earth. Especially when one tower, some distance off, which Gaia had chosen to highlight was clearly the iconic Empire State Building. With the recognition of that, Selene's world tumbled down, like a house of cards, but as the cards fell, her confusions were falling from her “eyes” as well. Everything dropped down into place. There was no morphine, no coma. She, Selene, was just dead.

The bus had killed her. This was her afterlife. The rods with their elliptical auras around them were the living, of both sexes. In New York before her, they were riding around in cars. In the other mountainous place, it was night, so they were all asleep. The spheres, like her, were the dead, or at least the non-living, in some way attached to the living, hanging around them, yet not interacting with them. The other similar word for the plane, or surface of the ground, which had confused her, must have meant inanimate.

Hence the three similar words: living, ex-living and non-living or animate, non-animate and inanimate. The negatives swam in her mind as “not alive” or “dead” in usage proved to be confusingly ambiguous, implying in English either no longer alive or never alive. Everything started swimming in Selene's mind, as the awful reality sank in. Gaia, having orchestrated the wake-up call as gently as she could, took Selene back to her original setting and withdrew. We must temporarily avert our minds from what followed as Selene grieved over the loss of the relationships and desires developed in her short life.

Selene marvelled that the expectation of waking up back in her normal life had blinded her to the obvious for so long. She appreciated the way that Gaia had gently revealed the truth to her, and was grateful for the time to be alone with her thoughts and the memories of the people she would never see again. Selene, however, was not one to dwell in morbidity for long. From childhood she had not been able to pull a long face and mope, holding that

negative mood in which other children would revel. “Life goes on,” she would always say.

With new “eyes,” new understanding, Selene re-attuned to the vibrational world around her. Having seen New York, she viewed the scene with more analytic eyes. Clearly, this was more like England. The rods were mostly vertical in odd patterns about her. Strangely, spheres were also moving around as well, but why? Could the dead communicate with the living? Did they watch over their relatives? If so, why wasn't she with her family? How did they communicate? With the sadness still with her, Selene decided to concentrate on the other spheres, to see what exactly they were doing.

Some were projecting dark, sombre colours onto their surfaces, but one pair, further away, was bright and jolly. As Selene looked more closely at them, she saw that they were either side of a very dark, horizontal ellipsoid, the central rod of which was only slightly radiating. As she watched, the rod glimmered for the last time, like a guttering candle, and was extinguished. An elliptical aura rose away from the darkened rod, twisting and writhing, shrinking into a dim sphere. The two brighter spheres jostled the dark one, impinging on its aura and spinning around it. There was no real communication, no language seemed to be exchanged but the mood of the darker sphere lightened and, as if something had rubbed off from the others, some colour began to creep across its surface. Although such a touching moment had taken place, Selene saw that later the three spheres were going their separate ways, there was, for them,

no real interconnection in the afterlife.

Selene moved out further into the town she had known as home. Here, everyday life was taking place for the living, but the spheres of the dead appeared, on the most part, to move randomly around, if at all, with no real purpose or any interaction. Attempting to estimate the relative numbers of living and dead that had come to her attention so far, Selene reckoned them to be about equal. This seemed strange to her because if all the dead from the beginning of time were around the Earth as spheres, there would surely have to be many times more spheres than ellipsoids. Even with the steadily increasing population, there should have to be more spheres. Her attention was usurped by an event in what she surmised must have been the hospital.

A rod in a strangely spread-eagled position was being attended to by three other rods. All four were showing some levels of excitement, flashing bright colours, in their elliptical auras. However, even more excitement was being shown by a sphere that was lingering close by. Suddenly, the sphere entered the epicentre of attention, deflated and disappeared, and a small radiating rod could be seen at the centre of the action, that had not been there before. The small rod was placed apart and tended to by one of the attendant rods. With this clear demonstration, Selene realised that it was really Gaia who was directing her attention, tacitly.

The question of the balance between the numbers of living and dead was resolved before her eyes through the simple process of reincarnation. The

dead were re-born. As the numbers seemed to be pretty much equal, it must be a two shift system, Selene thought. Taking the biblical timings, seventy years alive, seventy years dead. Accident or disease would perhaps result in longer death, and longevity in shorter death. Such could explain why many communities give the name of the grandfather or granduncle to a boy, and grandmother or grandaunt to a girl. It wouldn't really be that simple because the generations come round too often, but it could be a tradition kept in commemoration of the natural process. Obviously, in the full cycle of 140 years five or six generations could have been born, not just two.

It seemed that the big problem with reincarnation was explaining an increase or reduction in population. With a living world population of seven thousand million, there should be seven thousand million dead as well. But when there were only five thousand million alive, how many dead were there? Five thousand million, the same as the living, or nine thousand million, to allow for the increase to come? Gaia gently slid Selene to a new place where many babies were born. The spheres were too few, and as she watched one of the spheres became over-excited, flashing bright colours, pulling outwards at the sides while the vertical equator reduced, until it separated and became two, entering two small bodies to create two living ellipsoids. With another shift of viewpoint Selene watched as in another area of the world two quiescent spheres merged, blended together and became one before entering upon a new incarnate life. Through such repeated

examples Gaia taught Selene how a balance between living and dead souls is achieved.

As Selene considered the division of spheres, to create two different souls, she had to accept that everybody is bi-polar. Inside each person there are two entities pulling in different directions, that are blended within the final make-up of that individual, like the horses in the tarot card of *The Chariot*. No doubt, if they could gladly be separated, each would be found to be composed of two opposing tendencies as well... ad infinitum. How would it feel to be split in two? Just the same... As for being recombined with another, the four tendencies would simply team up into two camps, once more in opposition to each other.

So much for the general tendencies or attitudes of an individual, but what about the personal memories? Again, under Gaia's guidance, the scene changed to that of some newly deceased spheres from a disaster in the world. Stripped of consciousness and attendant hypocrisy, which extinguished at death, their loss, grief and anger could be clearly seen in the blackened colours sluggishly swirling across their surfaces. Gaia gently soothed the spheres with peaceful overtones, and gradually, neutralised and dissolved the memories that pained them. “And God shall wipe away their tears,” remembered Selene from the Bible. Perhaps with the pagan waters of the river of the Greek underworld, Lethe, meaning forgetfulness.

Another scene came. A dead soul was seemingly dogging the movements of a living being, probably

its child in life. Clearly from the two auras, the dead was able to some extent taste life vicariously through the other, using their familial connection, although it apparently caused some burden to the living entity. Again Gaia stepped in, and the waters of Lethe got to work. Selene was shown many similar cases where the past life or death of the deceased soul bound it to some negativity, some wrongness or "sin," many of them appearing perfectly reasonable at first glance, like a love that tried to pass through death itself, although love is represented in marriage as "until death us do part, according to God's holy law."

It was shown by Gaia to Selene, through example, that by halfway through the discarnate state a soul, or sphere, being willingly cleansed of any residue of negativity or desire from its past life begins to wander aimlessly around nursing an ever-growing need, a desire to take on flesh again. How that was achieved, in equivalent detail, was the next lesson, which took Selene into territories that she could never have imagined.

Selene was positioned to watch a cleansed, brightly swirling sphere. It appeared to be sensing the ellipsoids as it passed them by, almost smelling them, trailing a small, dissipating wisp of ectoplasm between it and them as it roamed. Clearly it was searching. Finally, it found what it was looking for and deposited a small, swirling coloured marker into the aura of that particular ellipsoid. Then it continued roaming, again apparently randomly, sensing ellipsoids as it passed by them as before. Finally, again, the sphere found what it was looking

for and, again, left a marker in the aura of the targetted ellipsoid. The highlighting now switched to the two ellipsoids. They led their separate lives, interacting as they willed as living rods with their coloured auras reflecting their attitudes and moods but never losing the markers placed in them by the sphere.

Selene appreciated that the time scale was most likely reduced to make a clear point, because then, quite quickly, at some time and place the chosen rods happened to come together. The markers responded, lit up and spread their colours throughout the auras, revealing that the corresponding hearts and minds were suffused with their mutual attraction. An ectoplasmic dance began between their radiant auras, not visible in their own world except as the twinkling in their eyes. They would come to call it love at first sight, not imagining that their, as yet, unborn child had orchestrated the whole event, because, as the story unrolled, the couple were shown as the woman gave birth and the original sphere that had marked them twisted, buckled and shrivelled down as it entered the body of the baby, before taking its first breath and "became a living soul."

This extended demonstration was important for Selene so that she would not erroneously imagine that spheres would just enter an alien body. No doubt, the mother felt she was talking in her mind to the undeveloped child in her womb, while throughout the pregnancy the sphere had been next to the mother, intimately interacting with her, as their auras clearly revealed through the blending of

their swirling colours. As was made plain to Selene, it was mainly the over-riding need of the sphere to be appropriately re-born in their child that initiated the attraction between these particular parents.

Selene followed many different cases. One where the parents already had a child when they were chosen as a unit by a sphere to create another baby. Another where a sphere had to be split itself and then one of the daughters spheres had to be split again in order to enter a set of triplets. Another, sad case, where the baby miscarried and the sphere needed some rapid soothing from Gaia with the waters of Lethe to recover its equilibrium.

What Selene couldn't miss, however, during the parade of varied life stories in the raw, was that she, herself, was growing in size. She was now many times larger than the spheres she was watching and also positioned on a higher level, but assumed that this was a false side-effect from the cinematic style of the study she was engaged in. In front of her "eyes" a procession of beings lived, died, were cleansed, formed new bodies, lived again, mated, bore children, died again, split and recombined in an endless, mesmerising dance. But then, Gaia opened Selene's vibrational eyes wider.

At first Selene couldn't understand the confusion she was seeing. The spheres and ellipsoids she had been following began to rise in vibrational rate, their colours turning shades of blue in her visual field as hundreds more red, orange, yellow and green spheres and ellipsoids of steadily reducing sizes began to appear in her field of vision. In no

time, she was swamped by the number of tiny souls and lives that swarmed all around her. Smaller and smaller they came, to enter into the giddying dance of living creatures, as Selene became capably equipped to see all animal vibrations, not just human. Each species lived and died at its own rate, usually in some proportion to the size of its members. The same events that she had seen in the human life-cycle were now played out before her in the accelerated, hypnotic swirls of the entire animal kingdom. Before she could finish thinking the question, Selene was shown transmigration of species, as the cream of one order of animals could migrate to a higher one as had happened in the evolution of the species. However, downward migration as a punishment, as taught in certain Eastern religions was never seen. Much contact with humans, as happens with beloved pets, during the life of mammalians could occasionally boost them into human levels.

If she had still had lungs, Selene would have had to take a deep breath with what occurred next. The phantasmagoria of spiralling colours yet again began to be pushed towards the blue end of the spectrum as her reception of vibration increased again and new forms began to crowd around her. Varying vastly in size, up to enormous, spreading reds and greens that towered unmistakeably over the rest as trees, down to grasses, mosses and lichens that covered the undulating plane of the ground. To Selene's surprise, there were vegetable spheres as well as the animal and human. Although the rods in the vegetable ellipsoids were more varied in shape,

they still had a general rod like form from head to tail, or from branch to root, that is, and they still radiated their ellipsoids. In fact, at one point all three types were close together and Selene saw that, as with the cells that compose the members of the various kingdoms, the similarities between them are more than the real differences. No wonder a visionary seeing such things would think of metempsychosis. The cleansed psyche of a man or a cow or a silver birch are not so very different in form and all are similar in their striving to reincarnate. The psyche of a plant can split to enter into a million germinating seeds, although most will quickly die, and have psychical links of attraction with particular species of birds or bees. The souls of domesticated animals can have reciprocating effects with the humans that tend them. The similarity between plant, animal and human was so striking that Selene felt there must be some prior mould, a forerunner to explain it, beyond the developmental ideas of DNA.

Gaia, who was still quietly leading Selene's guided tour, had one more surprise to pull. Again the living dance before Selene's eyes moved towards the blue end of the spectrum and Gaia revealed herself, in her full glory. The entire plane, curling gently downwards into the distance, that all creatures rested upon became red. The redness crept upwards into each plant, animal and human, both dead and alive, until the entire biosphere of life on Earth was glowing with its ruddiness. Selene felt herself projected outwards away from the planet, until, at a distance, she was turned to view it

in all its glory. There was Life on Earth, each speck comfortingly wrapped in the master template, or perhaps mistress template, of all those different souls she had seen. Each was an approximating copy of Gaia, and each was contained in Gaia, and each was composed of the fundamental, vibrating stuff of Gaia. They composed, in their varying species, the living organs of Gaia and together completely composed her, and yet, Gaia was before them. They came together and formed her in an Aristotelian way, but first she was the Platonic archetype for each and every one of them.

Concentrating now, on just the living rods, Selene was shown the Brotherhood of Life on Earth, represented as a huge, vibrational doughnut that resolved into the image of a great snake that was eating its own tail. The worm Ouroboros, of ancient Egypt, as the higher creatures of the head fed on their lower brothers of the tail. As all life is intimately related, brother can only eat brother, sustaining and evolving the whole. Animal eats plant or other animal, human eats animal and plant, plant feeds from the organic breakdown of both, while man kills man in his continuous search for supremacy over others without, usually, even consuming the product, as all life is swept around in a continuous cycle of perpetuation. A carrot is as much our brother as a lamb, albeit on a more remote branch of life, but still our brother. Naturally, higher, more evolved organisms feed from below and so the great worm, eating its own tail, develops and is perpetuated. Cases of insectivorous plants or man-eating tigers or sharks reveal opportunists

exploiting the weaknesses of higher creatures, but still in that way life evolves.

With that final view of the totality and unity of life on Earth, a reddened Selene was drawn back into the comforting sea of vibrations by the protoplasmic umbilical cord that had held her aloft. Reddened, because of course, she was also an expression of overtones riding on those fundamental notes that were Gaia.

As she was drawn back into Gaia, in that instantaneous moment, Selene felt a chain of thought race through her mind. Was there something in the centre of a sphere, as the ellipsoids had a rod? Or were they empty, without corporeal base? Did Gaia have a centre which interacted with the spinning, molten core of the planet? After all, a cell has a nucleus controlling the protoplasm outside itself, as does an atom or even a solar system, but then again, a soap bubble or a tennis ball does not. Maybe, however, bubbles and balls are man-made, not alive, whereas cells, atoms and solar systems are living things. The answer, perhaps, was that something is there at the centre but it exists in some higher dimension, hidden from view, like the centre of a black hole, which is substance that has disappeared from sight and can only be known by its affect on surrounding matter. A vibrating sphere would, therefore, be the event horizon of a black hole. A thought which lead inevitably to the question of our existence. Does the outer world we perceive exist, in whatever mode of existence we find ourselves, or is it just a visible reflection or projection, through the spherical mirror

of our event horizon, of those internal processes which lie in the hidden depths within each of us?

PART 3

As the vista around her returned to the accepted, populated plain, a vision now arose in Selene's mind. An alteration of perspective. Below there stretched away from her a vast ocean of gently undulating, viscous blackness, while above stretched an equivalently endless expanse of glowing, white light. Between the two lay a void. All was quiet, eternal.

Then, at some moment, a tiny disturbance began in the smooth sheet above. A small bulge began to protrude downwards, yellowing as it progressed. Then, streaking with pastel tints, it swelled out below the fluorescent sky forming a dependant sphere which reached down towards the dark ocean. As it gently touched the surface a reaction followed in the blackness, spiralling around the point of contact, trying to rise up out of the ocean, taking on a purple hue. As the sphere now slowly retreated upwards, an equivalent sphere of dark, earthy shades was drawn up from the blackness until two equivalent globes of shimmering colour were

suspended between the monochrome floor and ceiling.

Between the spheres could be seen a short, thin bridge, giving them the appearance of an hourglass suspended in space. Then, as the spheres continued to commune together, the bridge began to glow from the energy passing through it. Fitfully, at first, it glowed, gaining in brightness, but always with an unsteady flicker like a candle flame caught in a draught. Slowly it brightened, until a pulsating peak was achieved, varying only slightly in intensity and colour. Then, after some interval, it dipped wildly in brightness, the bridge split apart, the light failed and the two spheres were slowly reabsorbed into their respective seas. After a pause, the scene was repeated with another pair of spheres, but this time the achieved brightness and colour of the glowing light were different.

Then, again and again, the spheres came, in numbers now, each connecting bridge flickering with its own particular intensity and hue. As she watched the void between black and white fill with radiant points of colour, Selene understood the lesson – it represented a vibrational map, from the highest psychic pulses above to the material depths below. Each discarnate soul, reaching down into matter, formed its own physical body. While joined as an hourglass, the energy exchanges through the bridge created consciousness, seen as the glowing light. A delicate, fragile light which flickered with each period of sleep or illness or other unconsciousness. Then, with death, the bridge parted and consciousness was no more. The colour

of the conscious light depended on the development to which the soul had attained, while the brightness was modified by the internal and environmental conditions met within the physical body. Will passed from the soul into consciousness and became itself shaped by the bodily needs within its particular surroundings until, through acclimatisation, it began to affect both the appearance and stance of the physical body and originally pure desires of the conjoined soul, as both suffered under its growing impact.

With the passing of consciousness, will returned to the soul, any untruth such as pride, hypocrisy or self-deception perished and the newly dis-incarnate soul was left naked before its maker as in the Christian Day of Judgement or the Ancient Egyptian Scales of Maat where Thoth weighs the heart of the deceased against a feather to reveal its level of sin. So consciousness, so fragile itself, developing to protect the delicate bridge between soul and body from the vicissitudes of life, has been so outrageously overblown by the human animal with possessiveness and self-importance that he wrongly believes it to be the sole purpose and product of his existence.

With that, Selene having understood its meaning, the vision retreated.

Gaia now withdrew from Selene once more, allowing her time to digest the novel and overwhelming input of lessons. Lessons taken in cinematographic form rather than the syllabic plodding by rote that had occupied them before. Selene's major shock that she had, indeed, passed

away from the world as she had known it, and that this sphericality was now her entire existence, needed that time to be fully absorbed and digested.

As she contemplated the twisting, writhing flows of energy that was the sum mass of both living and dead creatures on Earth, Selene found that she was able to gain a form of control over her perceptions, giving her the ability to tune-in to specific frequencies and targets, so tuning out the confusing background "noise" and enabling her to examine the attitudes, thought patterns and simple desires of individual souls or beings. She could look into the bewildering flow, and as she concentrated on a particular part all around it expanded away from the centre, changing colour towards the appropriate red or blue ends of the spectrum until disappearing from view as infra-red or ultra-violet, while the intended object or objects remained alone, highlighted in full, swirling colour. Selene was also gaining some control over time for herself, allowing her to speed-up or slow-down the motion as Gaia had originally done for her.

In this way, Selene watched as various pairings of creatures, not always of the same species, living or dead, revealed in their auras the influence each had had upon the other. The sights recalled to her some lessons on primitive magic. Not the sympathetic kind, when a shaman splashes water from a branch on to the ground to imitate rainfall, in the certain knowledge that, by correspondence, such will bring about the much needed rain. No, the other, contagious magic, when a subtle energy or influence is passed from one being to another by

direct contact. In Divinities, was given the story of the bleeding woman who touched Jesus' hem and was cured. He felt the virtue go out of Him, and asked whom it was who had touched Him, before blessing her.

Then, there was Selene's farmer grandfather who had told her, when she was a teenager, that if a rogue bull should get into the cows, it will not only produce that year's generation of unwanted calves, its influence will continue, even affecting the later generations of calves produced by the correct, desired bull. That's why men wanted to take a virgin to wife. This idea, demeaned as a type of xenogenesis, didn't fit in with modern genetic theory, but the tillers of the land knew older truths.

Then, there was the clever bindweed in her childhood garden. Near the back fence a tiny oak seedling was growing. As a girl, Selene had kept the weeds and grass at bay to give it a chance. Then the leaves on the bindweed tendrils of a nearby patch from under the fence, as they approached, changed shape. From the normal, green spearheads of bindweed they became twisted and scalloped and reddened and looked more like oak leaves. Her father had jokingly said that it was because she was protecting leaves that looked like that. But how did the bindweed know that? How did it know, either <u>what</u> she was protecting or the shape and colour of the oak leaves? It must have been able to sense the patterns of the vibes around it.

Then, there is the well known fact that couples as they age in each other's company begin to resemble each other. A friend at school had sat in the hospital

holding the hand of one of her grandparents, who was slowly passing away. It was very sad and made her cry, but, in the later years, she wasn't quite sure if it had been her grandmother or grandfather. Again, another girl said her aunt and uncle had changed places when they arrived in their forties. He had taken on the feminine, Ma element, and spent weekends wearing a straw hat, playing a flute or recorder, singing silly songs and writing poems, while she, taking on the masculine, Ra element, had given up her knitting, was driving the car, doing the family finances and planning for their future. This exchange, although causing whispers amongst family and friends, had been completely harmless.

Then again, some people often resemble their pets. Does the person become like the pet, or does the pet become like the person? The truth must be that in such close contact each influences the other. In fact, such pets as these, heavily affected by human contact, must be of the higher animals whose souls may have a chance to rise into the human echelons.

Selene watched, fascinatedly, as one spherical soul appeared to be aiding in which egg to expand and descend its mother-to-be's fallopian tube and later involved in the natural choice of its father's sperm that fertilised it. So the unborn *first* child - note the importance of the first child in all primitive cultures - not only chooses its parents, and brings them besottedly together, but also manipulates the genetic traits it requires for its body-to-be from the two parental gene-pools. Of course, fully cleansed in Lethe and re-awakened to the true realities of life,

the soul, as a sphere is well able to judge what physical genes will further aid its development and eventual evolution into the perfected form. Momentarily, Selene felt a little wistful over the loss of her natural life. Missing her chance to completely bond with the soul of her first-born both before and after it entered its tiny body with its first breath. Clearly, to her, as the souls of mother and baby interact, the purity of the soon-to-be incarnated soul rejuvenates and uplifts the spirits of the mother, beatifying her, as Selene, while alive, had seen revealed on the faces of pregnant women she had known.

Selene was mesmerised by her new vision of the world, and completely captivated by her expansion of knowledge gained through seeing the interactions between the living and the dead. No wonder marriage is "until death us do part," when relationships are controlled by the unborn children. Who can know to whom they will be made to be attracted in the next life? It will depend upon the first soul that desires their particular admixture of genes.

Could she have been like that? Selene wondered. As a soul, last time round? She was a first-born. Did she really seek out her mother and father and beguile them, forcing them together? Did she really interfere with their nuptials to get her gene balance just right? Such possibility would mean that although the woman is the heart of the family, the man becomes just the limbs, like drones in a beehive, because the head is revealed to be in the first-born, the instigator of the family, the

controlling force. At best, men are for the family a necessary interface with the hostile outside world, defenders and hunters, hence naturally more competitive and aggressive, while women, the gatherers, are more cooperative. Farming surely began with women. But the child...? No wonder to enslave a nation one killed off its first-born, leaving it will-less, directionless, a nation of zombies fit only to obey.

It made clear another reason why Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, is so important in the beginning after death. We ought not to have “Romeos and Juliets” or “Flying Dutchmen” sailing through the generations under their own desirous steam - they ought to forget - they have to - they will be made to.

New images crowded in on Selene. A stacking system became visible. Spheres of second or third born children and more were following, in turn. Some spheres as they dogged couples of ellipsoids, creating strings of potential babies. In other species, those that had litters of off-spring, the chains were more visible either as lines like toad spawn or clusters like frog spawn. However, within such chains there was no jostling for position, all were content with their place in the queue. Having been cleansed in Lethe, they had none of the squabbling drives of living creatures, but followed patiently, confidently awaiting their own turn.

At that point, Selene's thoughts hit a wall. Illuminated now by her train of thought, she could see her problem clearly - what about her own Lethe? Why did she retain all her earthly memories? On thinking on it however, the

monumental regret over her parents and utter sadness for them, over their certain grief at losing their precious, young daughter had very quickly eased during the recent onslaught of impressions. Perhaps that indicated the beginning of forgetting. She had been a compassionate rather than a callous person. She could have been expected to grieve, both for her parents and, perhaps, for her lost future self, for some considerable time. It just didn't feel as if such a considerable time had passed. Could it be that this is what being dipped in Lethe felt like from within it? And then again, what about her consciousness? She was quite sure what she was experiencing was conscious. Only one course of action lay open to her, and Selene took it. “Hello, Gaia,” she said.

“Hello, Selene,” Gaia responded, instantly. Selene was quite sure that Gaia knew of her confusion, but without words it would be difficult to explain in detail and even more difficult to understand the answer. Gaia seemed to concur with Selene's analysis, because she plunged straight into a new round of rote learning. This time, syllables having been worked completely, it was a continuation of simple words, short compounds of those known syllables.

Gaia began with directions, in pairs, front-back, up-down, left-right, here-there, above-below. All words were demonstrated by highlighting relevant spheres or ellipsoids. Then physical qualities large-small, hard-soft, fast-slow. The whole range slid down to Selene in the swing of the dark red pendulum with highlighted examples continuing

until she understood and repeated the words. More came, and more again, opening up very much like the first class, Relationships, in the Synopsis of Categories of “Roget's Thesaurus”, a book which Selene had once taken to her heart while at school.

Selene had been an accomplished scholar in linguistics. One grandmother was Greek and the other had been Belgian, speaking French, but doting on English literature. Her farmer grandfather spoke strangely, coming from the borders of Wales, and was believed, by her other, “city” grandfather, to be a druid.

So, Selene was able to absorb the masses of new words as if she was learning more French or Greek from one of her grandmothers. In that corner of her mind where languages live, Selene sorted and packed away the vibrational forms and meanings as they came to her, as she had previously done with the syllables. Not surprisingly, more of Roget's categories came along, although not always in the same order. Space - dimension, shape, time, movement. Matter - organism, sensation. Thought - reason, imagination, communication. Will - desire, possession, giving. Feelings - sympathy, duty, worship. Each category was dissected and coded in the new language, revealing the relative ease with which a language built up purely of ideas could be used to express complex thoughts. If two words had similar vibrations, then they had similar meanings. Unlike the post-Babel tongues of her previous life, there was no precedence taken from other languages, like Latin or Old French or Middle German, or wrong usage or misheard and

mispronounced syllables or some odd, regional or dialectal form to muddle the picture.

Time passed easily for Selene. She was aware, in a sideline of thought, that she still appeared to be growing larger. The other spheres and ellipsoids seemed far below her now, and much smaller, although to emphasise an idea, Gaia could magnify any area containing those she chose. Further down the mental siding, Selene also noticed that this education she was receiving didn't appear to be given to any of the other spheres. It seemed that, as each was cleansed from the relationships, fears, hopes and memories of its previous life, it dived straight back into the driving desire for a new life and started vetting courting couples. The wheel of rebirth in action. Not that the dead are jealous of the living and watch from a lustful desire for the fleshly things, as some books may profess, they are actually beginning the preparation for their rebirth by sizing up potential parents. Obviously, the more highly evolved soul will put much more effort into managing the exact circumstances for the creation of its next life than a more lowly being. This is the ladder within rebirth, that stretches throughout all life on Earth from an amoeba or a filament of spirogyra up to the Dalai Lama, like a spiral staircase endlessly twisting upwards into the heavens as its material counterpart, the strand of DNA ably reflects.

It was during such contemplations that ran parallel with the lessons, that Selene became aware that the basic energy, the force that underpinned all vibration was in fact duplex. There were two copies

of each vibration within the Aether, opposing each other, tightly wound as the twin spiral of the DNA is wound. The creation of one could not exist. Just as the abstraction of a one from zero posits a minus one remaining, everything had its counterpoint and counterpart. When a sandcastle is placed on the sand, next to it is its negative, the hole in the beach where its sand originated. All vibration was double. Gaia's fundamental tones were double. Selene's squeaks, that, incidentally, had deepened of late, were double. Spheres and ellipsoids were composed of threads of double vibrations twisting about each other in such a way that if they were compressed into a oneness, nothing would remain of thread or vibration or being. It was through this doubling of vibration that Gaia was able to highlight some particular being for effect, and binary fission could take place if populations had to rise, and conversely, fusion was easily accomplished if numbers should need to fall.

As the lessons progressed, Selene found her thinking slipping into the new language, the angelic language as she considered it. That is, the original language, towards which all the fallen, earthly tongues ought to re-aspire. It appeared to her marvellous that Gaia could be both in full attendance to her linguistic needs while tirelessly ministering to the myriad needs of the victims of old-age, war, famine and accident from across the entire face of the globe, gently washing the torments and horrors from them with the waters of forgetfulness.

Finally the linguistic lessons came to an end. The

three major areas of thought - Space, Time and Mind were fully detailed, analysed and packed away in Selene's memory. This three-dimensional array of ideas could be thought of as both a dictionary and a thesaurus, as the conversion of ideas into vibratory forms produced interlocking scales and tables of perfect sense. Matter correctly seen as the compression of Space was appropriately stored. Organic Life seen as Mind incarnate in Matter had its place. Death, seen as the releasing of Mind from its material entrapment, was nearby.

Like all vibrations, the array of ideas could be viewed as a colour wheel, while deeper and deeper analysis at any point revealed increasing numbers of syllables on the basic theme, and an increasing number of colour sub-wheels. Space being the lowest vibrational idea Selene could see as red, whilst Time and Mind were yellow and blue, respectively. Matter adding some element of Time to its basic Space tinged orange, while Life and Death gave off pastel shades of peach and magnolia, nearing as they were the absolute white. Closer still, as a delicate pink, she saw the Creator, we know as God, the Father, or more simply as Love. On the right-hand of Love, in palest gold, sat the perfect Life which Selene knew as the Son and on the left the enticing ice blue of the infinite Light of pure reason she knew as the Holy Spirit. Just as the colours of the rainbow combine to make the white light, although they are, initially, derived from the white light, so Selene saw that the three Persons of the Godhead encompassed Matter, Energy and Thought, although such fundamental concepts had,

first, originated in Him, the pure whiteness of the Ineffable One, the All, that we, with our limitations of language, also call God, being the perfect confluence of Space, Time and Mind. Selene was awe-struck as she saw irrefutably proven through the angelic tongue that God is, God was and God will ever be, existing both throughout and beyond all space, time and mind.

After the lessons by rote, Gaia took Selene down for a close-up look at a newly disembodied sphere. Gaia demonstrated how the entire psychological world of the recently departed (from the other world) was available to be read, using the angelic language, like an open book. With the loss of consciousness, all the hopes and fears of a lifetime, the tainting guilt and cunning of the life that had ended were laid bare. No lie could be sustained within such a pure system. Subterfuge did exist as a concept, but stood revealed for what it was. Only the truth could be seen, even if it was the truth of a lie.

Very carefully, Gaia began to ease the being's sufferings, nullifying each vibratory path that contained any negativities by doubling it exactly out of phase with itself producing quietude. First the mortal pains and terrors were silenced. Then the emotions and burning desires which had actively driven the character were quenched. Then the perversions of thought, developed from wrongly facing the pressures of life, were gently straightened. Finally, the personal memories, both good and bad, were smoothed into oblivion. When she had finished, a handful of glistening gems were

left. Only the positive gains in attitude and character from the life that had been lost remained to be introduced into the vibratory essence of the sphere, which were in this particular case, as in most cases, precious few. Finally, the sphere was revealed in its purified form, encapsulating those few extra building blocks of experience gleaned from its previous life, cleansed and ready and eager to live again.

Selene watched as time after time spheres were washed in the waters of Lethe in this way. After the initial negation and shock of the death were soothed, and emotional grief for the life and connections lost had been erased, the next quarrel to be quelled within any sphere was over the perceived opportunities it had failed to face in achieving its full potential. “I wasn't fully equipped,” “I was constantly being deliberately blocked,” or “I had achieved my full potential but was robbed of it.” All life followed the same pattern. Be it an insect or an oak tree or a human baby, the pains and fears, the desires and perversions of thought ran along analogous lines imprinted on the outer layers of the souls by conscious minds in their short, fitful reigns. Sometimes no jewels of wisdom could be extracted from a life, which sadly was an opportunity wasted. However no degree of incarnate depravity, created by unfortunate circumstances or pressures of life, could rob the sphere of its previous accumulation of wisdom. Karma, in its strict sense of retribution for sins in past lives, did not exist. How could it, in a benign, loving universe that was neither pedantic nor vindictive? At the other end of the scale,

Humanists, while reacting to the inhumanity of historic excesses perpetrated by organised religion, have thrown out the baby with the bathwater and left themselves exposed to the four winds without a higher being upon which to draw.

Contrasting quality of life with longevity from such an inundation of examples, Selene clearly perceived that many fundamental lessons were able to be learned from a very short life, whilst against that, long life did not guarantee much, if indeed any, extra gathering of desired development.

Selene had grown in size again and she could well see that these examples which were highlighted for her were a tiny portion of the entire work being carried out by Gaia, planet-wide, where countless myriads of souls were soothed and cleansed at each moment. Sometimes a species was waxing in size, and Gaia drew one, two or three copies from one sphere to accommodate the increase, copies which would, through their own experiences in coming generations, begin to diverge and increasingly vary from each other. At other times a species was waning, and Gaia needed to lead the recombining of spheres with similar pasts, creating fewer in number for the reduced population, but carefully ensuring that none of the wisdom of experience was lost in the process.

It became clear to Selene that far from being “shackled” to the wheel of rebirth, people, animals and plants, in fact all creatures, were absolutely revelling in it, they wouldn't have had it any other way. This was their most sublime joy. Their physical, embodied continuance. Albeit, meaning

perhaps living in the misery of squalor, pain, hunger or slavery both to their own or other species, while prone to disease, injury, depression and fear. Once they were free from the suffering of one life the souls were clamouring for a chance to dive back into that state of conditioned existence. In fact, within their past histories, written for all the initiated to see in their auras, the beings could be traced back to the dawn of life on Earth. All had their beginnings as the vibratory combinations of chemicals in the primordial soup, slowly evolving into simple cells. Dinosaurs were there, in the corridors of the past. During the great annihilation some had regressed to stay as smaller reptiles, most leapt forward to become warm-blooded as birds or even, a few, as early mammals. Some men even had them in the annals of their past.

On and on went the practical lessons, delving into details that we, without the angelic tongue, can never hope to understand. Selene absorbed them all, being completely captivated by both the processes and the stories of the individual lives that were being so processed. All the time that Selene watched Gaia in action, or Gaia oversaw Selene in action, Selene grew. Until one day, quite unimaginably, Selene realised that she was as large as Gaia. Considering that she was an overtone of Gaia's base frequency, this would have seemed to Selene to be an impossibility. Yet it was so. As the final individual lessons came to an end, Selene had become the same size as Gaia, able to contain the whole of the living Earth.

Replacing the lessons, a new programme began

of juggling tasks. Selene was required to perform more and more complex combinations of care as Gaia opened up her highlighted view, revealing more and more creatures, of varying sizes, in dire need. The area of the planet highlighted for Selene's attention gradually increased as also did the range of species, leaving no space for spare time between, in fact, forcing Selene to overlap the work of relieving the dead of their negative thoughts, moods and feelings. Deeper and deeper, Selene was drawn into the operational refinements necessary to service the life and death dramas of a myriad of souls. Without the active aid of Gaia and the admirable clarity of ideas of the angelic tongue, Selene knew that none of this would have been remotely possible. Yet, slowly, she became competent in the multiplicity of tasks required within the everyday responsibilities of a planetary demiurge, over a growing sector of the surface.

With the necessary increases in her depth of care, Selene was driven to tune her reception of impressions with increasing refinement. The fundamental threads of vibration of which each creature was composed, sensed now as parts of Selene's own being, began to reveal the intricacy with which they were contorted and twisted into complex sub-units, each with sub-units of their own which, in the embodied, living creature, corresponded to organs and tissue types. Further examination revealed that it was, in fact, her own vibratory essence which was underlying their very existence, and that the sum of creatures in her care were spread throughout her own being like knots in

a ball of wool. She was unprepared, however, to discover that there was a constant subliminal communication running along these threads of her fundamental essence.

This contact, apparently, outside any level of consciousness, happened both within creatures and between them. Problems in need of resolution were automatically posited by the incongruous situations themselves that needed to be overcome, being revealed by their inharmonious vibrations. Once accurately defined, by a near or distant entity that had been through an equivalent experience, the solution became apparent. The very act of precise definition within the perfect language revealed the solution. Only the unwillingness of the quester to accept the analysis and ensuing solution, through stubbornness, ignorance, fear or guilt, would prevent the resolution of the problem, so leading, eventually, to Lethe and the the need for a rebirth.

Just as an artist does not produce only one painting in his lifetime by repeatedly over-painting parts of the same canvas in his search for perfection, but sets the old one aside to begin a fresh picture, so, too, the souls of creatures do not try to limit themselves to one life, but discard a string of past lives upon the fabric of history, like pearls strung along a golden thread.

Clearly, the dividing line between actively helping and passively watching the processes of resolution was becoming blurred. Selene began to wonder whether she was actually doing anything positive or just observing a grand problem solving mechanism acting, innately. Surely, this

demonstrated the way in which prayers are answered. Prayers are just requests for clear analysis, where resolution follows automatically if the analysis is accepted, while the petitioner remains blind to the process, just as a small prompt for a forgotten memory uses the same unconscious system within an individual being.

These mechanisms by which problems were analysed and solved fascinated Selene. As she deepened her awareness of the system, she realised that assumption was the key principle in operation. A sphere of a higher level was attracted to take on the troubled state of a newly passed soul, by assuming its condition, by wearing it, itself, and so accurately resolving the contorted problems it found from inside the diseased condition, as, indeed, a shaman, a native American medicine man, is reported to do. Just as our kidneys continuously cleanse our blood without the need for conscious guidance, so the system of assumption was eternally flushing out newly formed problems from all levels and species of life.

At that point, Selene began to perceive the answer to a question she had puzzled over for some time. Spheres were not just marking prospective parents for their next life as they appeared to move randomly around, they were occasionally marking other ellipsoids as well. As she followed this action in detail it became clear. Rods with some serious problem, which showed as darker, sluggish colours in their auras, were given a brightly coloured marker which contained the necessary solution. As the marker slowly dissolved into the swirling aura

of the rod the outcome was variable. Some accepted the idea with joy, as if they had had an inspiration and their auras brightened, while some, hardened by life into a negative frame of mind or too scattered in their thoughts to give it root, sadly rejected it and kept their murky auras. Just like the parable of the sower, though Selene, as she marvelled at its wisdom. So the dead may act as messengers or angels to the living in this way, but not as Guardian Angels, there was no connection between sphere and rod. Any cleansed sphere could receive, package and deliver a solution for a life-problem that some nearby rod seemed unable to take directly from the underlying vibratory matrix.

With her concentration at such a height, Selene noticed that her own basic tone had another sub-stratum. There, below her own frequency and that of Gaia, although, paradoxically, supported by the highest vibratory rate she had as yet encountered was an unplumbed depth that held both her and Gaia in its grasp. An all-pervading, background hum of mildly amused benevolence. Simultaneously larger and deeper and grander than anything experienced so far, yet faster and finer and far, far more exquisite. Upon this subject Gaia refused to be drawn, but, instead, lit up parts of Selene's own being revealing another startling fact.

Selene's growth in size was not just an expansion of what she had been, the perfected souls of a myriad of small creatures had been incorporated into her vibratory matrix. It was through the knowledge of such resident epitomes that she was so ably capable of rapidly resolving the various

issues presented to her. A form of intercession was in operation, just as Christians pray to the Virgin Mary to intercede for them before God, or a solicitor sets the defendant's case before a judge. Always with the last resort being, of course, a dip into Lethe, forgetfulness and rebirth. Selene marvelled at the procession of life before her and within her. All life, was looking up to and following that which preceded it and silently leading and aiding that which trailed behind it, inherently.

As Gaia opened wider and wider the area over which Selene was responsible, the Great Work, for that was indeed what it was, had become second nature. Parts of her consciousness were constantly employed freeing creatures from their guilts and devastations, but not unconsciously, as we walk or as a competent driver uses the controls of a vehicle. She employed her powers in a parallel sense, where the thousands of streams of analysis and resolution from her composite being were ably monitored together as a single flowing river where each and every individual water droplet was intimately known.

Finally the whole biosphere of Earth was under Selene's sway. As Gaia silently supervised, unknown to Selene, this was her final test. If she could manage to enclose the whole of life on Earth within her consciousness as one flow, and yet be aware, with compassion, of the flawed individuality of each particle it contained, the training would be complete and Gaia's work with her would be over.

Sensing the approach of this condition, “surely

now, something different will be coming," Selene thought. She looked outwards for the first time with her vibratory senses. There she saw the radiance of the Sun and marvelled at the glory that was Helios, who ruled over the whole solar system as a benevolent king over his domain, enveloping the planets in the folds of his vibrant energy. Selene finally recognised the origin of that sub-stratum of force that supported Gaia and herself. For the first time Selene saw that other beings were incumbent around the other planets, and, further, that other kings surrounded the nearest stars. As she marvelled at the panoramic view of living, spinning vortices of energies that surrounded her, filling the entirety of space, Selene was reminded of Vincent Van Gogh's painting "The Starry Night." Just as in his painting, there was no empty space. All was part of the living swirl. From children and madmen we learn the truth, she thought.

Then something totally unexpected happened. Gaia began to unstitch herself from Selene. From each part of each sphere, and each part of each ellipsoid, from the smallest to the largest, the meticulous unpicking took place. Selene sensed the event in fascination, as at each level where their combined vibrations reached, which, globally of course, was everywhere, Gaia detached herself, unzipping the forces that bound them by duplicating the other half of each oscillation, until two equivalent but separate spheres surrounded the world.

Within the disconnection Selene marvelled at the way in which the linkage of the living vibrations

paralleled the linkage of the physical systems which combined atoms into molecules and molecules into gross matter and such matter into the physical planet. The different chemicals, like carbon, oxygen and hydrogen were the cells types of the physical world, combining to create the mass of different molecules that acted as physical equivalents of organs in the organic world. Chemical organs that further combined to produce the substances necessary for organic life. It was clearly through this parallelism that spirit and matter were able to interact within the living beings, enabling the spirit to reach down and temporarily inhabit and move the inanimate matter.

Thus, finally, Selene was no longer a gigantic overtone of Gaia's vibrations. She had become a completely free-standing, oscillating sphere held only in the arms of the paradoxically speeding undertones of the loving Helios. The perfected souls of trees, grasses, insects, reptiles and mammals were operating within Selene as the organs of her body, resolving each its specific problems of life as the organs do within our bodies. Now she was the joint soul of the biosphere, both holding, and being composed of, all life on Earth, while intimately connected through symmetry to the chemistry of the physical planet.

Without Gaia's assistance or highlighting to point the way, any more, Selene was fully occupied in that active/passive resolution of the issues of an entire planet full of life. From microbes to blue whales, life became death and death became life. Individual cells, as they lived and died, were dealt

with within the organism to which they belonged, but that still left an uncountable number of single-celled and simple creatures that drew on Selene's attention through her composite organs. Beyond that, the complex organisms had, necessarily, much more complex psychological needs. The river of vibrational consciousness that circulated through Selene's being as blood courses through our veins, resolved many billions of issues per second, as we know time, and was proven to be sufficiently sound. With Gaia now only in disconnected observation, all problems that life could throw at her, the sum total that was Selene countered and corrected. And so, in this way, Selene was able to prove herself and pass her final test. She was capable of standing alone as the sole demiurge of our planet.

For the first time during the whole of her post-life experiences, Selene's vastly speeded thinking passed into imagination. Potential futures flashed before her consciousness at a giddying rate.

Perhaps now, she would be required to take her knowledge outwards towards a new world, around some alien sun. There to enfold and develop the necessary gaseous environment and begin the long road towards nurturing evolving life into thinking beings, as Gaia had done on Earth? To become a Gaia for a distant world?

Or, now that men were preparing to travel to the moon, it might be required that some developed being should be installed there to accept and watch over the astronauts during their sojourn on what had been a dead satellite. As a name, Selene, taken after her Greek grandmother, belonged to the moon

goddess in Greek mythology. Could that name, which had pestered her throughout her school years and later raised the obligatory eyebrows, be finally justified as the name of the demiurge of the moon? Selene felt that, if necessary, she was prepared to face the challenge.

"Goodbye, Selene," said Gaia, as they both bathed in the glory that was Helios, the Sun, and within the fantasy, Selene realised that, quite reasonably and obviously, it was to be Gaia who would be moving onwards.

"Goodbye, Gaia," responded Selene-who-was-now-Gaia, as she thought how foolish she had been to think that she would be the one to be loosed upon the cosmos. Just as, she mused, how foolish it was for man to imagine that release from the Wheel of Rebirth would lead immediately to an ego-dissolving merging into the One in Nirvana. At death, as she now knew well enough, the perfected being is necessarily and naturally required to look below, to perform other tasks.

Where Gaia would be needed, she could only conjecture. Perhaps to Helios, to learn his ways and take over from him, allowing him to move on to other wilder, untamed systems. Perhaps to another planet or even moon of Jupiter or Saturn to develop life there. Perhaps away, out of the Solar System, herself, to some newer star system where her services might be needed. Wherever Gaia was to go, that which had lovingly ruled over the Earth for an indeterminate length of time, was preparing to move away. However, she had provided for another, who had been found worthy, and had taken

her place. This must represent the dawning of a New Age, the Age of Aquarius, thought Selene-who-was-now-Gaia in her racing mentation.

She imagined watching the shimmering ball of energy that represented Gaia, appearing to merge into the sparkling, spiralling "void," as she was unerringly attracted upwards, towards the resplendent love of the solar disc. While knowing that this was the entity that had nurtured her over so many life-times until the time for her own initiation into the greater realities of life, Selene-who-was-now-Gaia felt a word from her past push up into her consciousness that summed up her feelings and thoughts on this imagined grandest of sights.

Not a word from the angelic tongue, but one from the Greek, taught to her on her Grandmother's knee. It was "sostá," meaning "as it should be." At that moment, every creature on the planet, every blade of grass, was living and dying just for Selene to partake of that perfect moment, and, equivalently, by partaking of that perfect moment Selene was enabling and empowering every creature on the planet to live and die as they justly required.

Yet, breaking into her reverie of crowning glory, there was an insistent pull upon Selene's awareness. Something was tugging her back into the surrounding reality, back into reality and beyond. Down she was drawn, into the vibrational world that lovingly enfolded her, down into the all-familiar, all-encompassing blackness and silence and then still further down...

EPILOGUE

Through that silent blackness came the sound of a huge wheezing. Like a thousand hurricanes it echoed around her and through her, with a feeling as if it was forcibly ramming air down into her tortured lungs. Selene's head was pounding as she arched backwards on the tarmac to accommodate the enforced breath, laced with the smells of burnt rubber and badly combusted diesel. What was happening? Where was Gaia to lead her through this new stage? Could these be the protective arms of beloved Helios, holding her so lovingly in his vibrant net? Gingerly, she opened her eyes.

Leaning over her, while squatting on her pelvis, with her blouse open, now carefully cradling her head in his arms, was Peter Patter. Having diligently studied first aid during his brief time with the St. John's Ambulance Brigade, he had succeeded in bringing Selene back from something far worse than a faint. Above and beyond Peter was a semi-circle of concerned faces. Selene recognised the ashen-faced bus driver among them. Towering over everybody was the dented front of his bus with its number 33.

A distant siren could be heard, gradually

approaching, fighting through traffic.

“Don't try to move, miss,” said the whiteness of the bus driver. “The ambulance is almost here.”

Selene squinted up at Peter Patter, who by now was kneeling beside her with his jacket folded under her head as he held her broken shoe and heel. He was leaning over her, face full of concern. Selene, mind still reeling from Gaia's revelations on the power of the will of the firstborn to manipulate its parents-to-be, nobly acquiesced to her fate, as she had consistently done in the blackness, and smiled up at him.

“Thank you, Peter,” she whispered, hoarsely. “If you'd like to, I think, perhaps, when I'm better, you might take me out for a ride on the number 33.”

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p.s. So, amazingly, it had been a lucky three day as Peter had prophesied, although not in a way he could ever have imagined.

p.p.s. Need I add that within a year Selene had become Mrs Patter and that they went on to have three delightful children? No, no, you are quite right, of course not.

LIFE TWO

I, OPENER

PART 1

I had no idea when I was young that I could have been anybody's first choice for anything. I was a funny sort of a kid. Only child, a bit solitary, a bit autistic, really. No proper friends, just some mates from school that went no further after the change to

secondary. My father had abandoned us when I was still little, leaving my mother to soldier on alone.

I always suffered with weird dreams at night. Trying to explain them to my parents or mates was like telling them to a brick wall, so I gave it up. Those were scary dreams, with groups of scary people doing weird things, while chanting and drums or wild music and shrieks could be heard in the background. It was always dark in the dreams with fires and torches burning. Strangely, many separate but quite distinctive people recurred in them throughout the years that I was having them.

As I grew and learned more about things in the world, I realised that these dreams which had pestered me, periodically, from an age of five, or even earlier, were actually dreams of witchcraft. These people constituted a coven of witches and what I was seeing in my dreams was some peculiar form of black mass. I need to say here and now that I was quite a timid personality, cowardly, not given to reading horror stories or the like because they scared me. I didn't like being scared. However, from the odd film trailer or article in a magazine, I had managed to form this definition of what I saw in my dreams. Not that I was always awake during them. Sometimes I had slept, yet still knew, on waking, that one had taken place. They left vague, sepia-tinted memories and an uneasy feeling of having been somehow used which would persist throughout the following day.

Entering teenage years, I made a serious effort to suppress the dreams. It was partially successful, in that they pretty well stopped being brought into

consciousness. But I still felt something was happening at night during certain times or phases of the moon, something which existed beyond where my level of awareness was prepared to reach. There was a lingering feeling, a presence, an atmosphere, an aura that was not right, not clean, but clung to me during some days following an episode. Around this time of puberty, I appeared to develop some kind of clairvoyance. I could occasionally catch another boy's thinking inside my head, usually something sarcastic about me. As they say, eavesdroppers never hear good about themselves. It continued in the street. I would pick a few words or a fleeting thought or a feeling as people caught sight of me approaching them along the pavement.

Parallel to these weird experiences, my education continued with only minor hiccups. One lunchtime in senior school, a supply teacher was telling us that because he couldn't find enough work to pay the rent, he, his wife and their young baby were facing eviction from their home. He was a likeable man, unlike some, and so in the next lesson, I pondered on that threat he faced while I was gazing at the sky outside the window. A whole lecture on the fallacy of private property “fell” into my head. As I was in English at the time, I wrote it down as my essay. It concerned the absolute absurdity of the idea of private possession of land. How ridiculous it was that one “speck of grease” born onto the planet for such a short time could claim total ownership and control over an area of its surface, just because some other self-righteous “specks of grease” said it could. In another year, in Religious Education, as I

was getting knotted over the plethora of differing Christian sects, I had another “psychic dumping.” Christianity was just an engraftment of Platonic philosophy onto a wild Hebraic root, tending towards the goal of enlightened, global Socialism. Proofs being the bitter cup of Christ copying the wormwood of Socrates, and the setting up of the early Christian communes amongst others. Again it became the basis of my essay. In both cases, I was summarily sent to the headmaster, who told me, in no uncertain terms, that I should not indulge myself in the bigoted ideas of such one-sided, twisted literature, wherever I had found it. I think my mother or, perhaps, absent father was tacitly blamed. Another time, in class, when asked what the ideal political system might be, I picked from the air the word “Theocracy.” This time the teacher misheard, or pretended to mishear, and said, “that's right, Democracy!”

So, in this way, my life continued. I passed what exams I had taken and prepared to enter some kind of further education. By that time, the whispering in my head from others was quite pronounced. I didn't need to be near them any more, I once heard my mother from the butcher's shop, half a mile away stating, conversationally, that I was a bit of a bother. If the subject matter concerned me, the whispers came clearer, otherwise there was just a general hissing, whistling hubbub in the back of my head, a bit like the descriptions of tinnitus.

Then, one day, everything changed. My sedate life was turned on its head. As I was walking down the high street absent-mindedly gazing in shop

windows, I had a glimpse, in the reflection of a shop front, of an old woman. She was sat in the back of a black, open-topped car of some luxury make, looking very proud but sour as the sun shone on her. She was dressed in black with black, lacy bits abounding and a black hat, and covered in black beaded necklaces of various sorts and lengths. In a black lace gloved hand she held a black cigarette holder in which was a black cigarette. I only needed a glimpse. I instinctively ducked down in the doorway, pretending to tie my shoelace, until the car had passed, hoping that she had not been able to see me in the shadows of the shop front. As the car drove sedately by, it appeared that she had not.

What was my horror of this woman? I had never set eyes on her before. I had better explain. She was completely and exactly the image of one of those scary coven members that I had often seen in my dreams. One of the founder members, I would say, because, for as far back as I could remember, she had always been there and was treated with great reverence and respect. She was, in fact, the High Priestess, known as Belladonna, the Comtesse Belladonna.

This sighting threw my whole existence into confusion. I had long accepted the idea that these dreams were just fantasies thrown up by some morbid streak in my personality, either inherited from some past ancestor or mere creations from my own sick head. The discovery that one of the major players in them existed in real life and could be sat there in flesh and blood being driven down my High Street, sent waves of numbing fear up and down my

spine. I should explain that these dreams were not just vague shadows of dimly seen, half-veiled motions in some misty, grey space. The clearest of them were very precisely observed and memorised, with detailed accounts of rituals carried out in secret, in the dead of night, sometimes indoors, sometimes outside, involving incantations and apparent animal sacrifice. I was quite sure that these vile practises, however private and select the membership may have been, could not be sanctioned by law. They must have been totally unacceptable to our modern mores.

After this sighting, I became more withdrawn, more reclusive, keeping indoors as much as I could, only going out on short forays in the evening. I became an increasing encumbrance in the house, but at least this was during the extended break from school after the exams and I wasn't required to be anywhere else. I watched TV or kept to my room and ate in the kitchen, in silence. It was then that I had another contact. I heard, quite clearly, as if said out loud in the room, a slimy, ingratiating voice in my head that said, “he lives nearby, I'm sure of it.” This voice was very well known to me from the dreams, it belonged to a squat toad-like man who oozed infinite menace, best compared, perhaps, with Peter Lorre, at his slimy, grovelling worst. His name was Dieter which in my youth I had translated as Detour - best given a wide berth. He seemed to be the policeman of the group - the Guardian. Whom this “he” was they were sniffing out, I had no doubt. The clarity of the voice meant they were close, probably in the High Street, just exactly

where the Comtesse Belladonna must have actually seen me. I crept upstairs on my hands and knees, keeping away from the windows, trying to blanket my thoughts.

So, first Comtesse Belladonna, then Dieter Düsseldorf. Who was left? Only the Lord and Master, Doctor Sir Charles MacAbré to come waltzing through our front door. After this, I became a nervous wreck. My behaviour was so anomalous, even for me, that my mother took me to see the GP. On hearing my case, he didn't hesitate in making a referral and passing me on to the local mental health team. While we waited for an appointment to come through, I hid. Decision time for further education came nearer, but the deadlines passed without me being able to sign up to anything. My nerves were shot, my life was destroyed. I could only live in fear of pending discovery. I regressed, even, embarrassingly, reinstating an old habit of occasional bed-wetting.

As the letter fell through the letterbox and landed on the doormat, a wave of terror came with it. It was in the house... I was trapped... I was petrified. However, as nothing actually happened, I had to relax a bit. In fact, it was just an appointment to meet one of the therapists for an initial assessment. The date was quite close, so we didn't have long to wait. After a bus ride and walk to a posh area of the town we didn't know well, my mother beside me, we arrived at a large detached house with brass nameplates on the gatepost. It was called “Yew Tree House.” As we stepped over the threshold another wave of terror passed through me. I had to

swallow it.

Perhaps I didn't quite introduce myself properly at the beginning of this writing, as I lean towards numbers rather than letters, so I think I had better do so now. My name is Oliver Penner, I am sixteen years old, as you may have guessed. With a name like Oliver in a boys' school, and as I was non-athletic and so rather slight, I was called Oliver Twist, which was shortened to Twisty and in the final years - Twisted, which was appearing much more apt to all concerned. And now I had been taken to a place to have my increasing twistedness straightened out. When we were shown into the office of the therapist, everything was very informal and relaxed. He referred often to the paper we had submitted by post, in answer to the hundred questions on their induction sheet sent with the appointment letter.

“That's all fine, enough,” he said, “not too much to worry about there.”

I had better add, that my dreams and any other real concerns I may have had were strictly off-limits, never spoken of to anybody for many years. I felt easier, not threatened by the therapist and began to unwind a bit.

“I'll just consult with my colleague, if you'll excuse me.” he said.

It's my fault. I relaxed, felt safe, no threat there. As he returned he led his colleague to the door, and introduced him.

“You're very lucky and honoured, today, Oliver. This is our top man, Doctor Sir Charles MacAbré.”

I was caught. My bladder and sphincter ganged up on me, agreeing between themselves that this was the best time to demand release. I fought with them, squirming, as Doctor Sir Charles MacAbré entered the room proffering an outstretched, oversized hand.

"Mrs Penner. How do you do?" And turning quickly my way, "this, then, must be young Oliver? Hello!"

My mind was racing. I tried to swallow myself, but got stuck in my throat. I gurgled pleasantly trying to look unimpressed. His bulky, two metre frame towered over me. I tried not to cringe.

"Oliver. Hmm. O. Penner. Sounds almost like a tin opener, or a bottle opener. Well done. Quite appropriate."

I tried to look amused, as if I'd never heard <u>that</u> one before.

"How old are you, now, Oliver?" he asked, innocently enough. "Sixteen?"

I knew that he already knew that one well enough.

"I'm sixteen-and-a-half, Sir," I answered, nonchalantly, I hoped.

"Really? Well done. Quite appropriate."

Then it was all over. With a deprecating wave of the hand he left the room, followed by our own therapist, clearly talking through some important point about some important, other patient. We left Yew Tree House with a follow-up appointment for many weeks ahead.

Back home - yes, I did make it back home in one piece with Mum, I went up to my room carrying her old, pasta saucepan. I had some serious thinking to do, and I had some hope that a large aluminium saucepan over my head would stop my thoughts from radiating outwards.

Now I knew for sure that the big three were on to me. First and foremost was the Grand Master, Doctor Sir Charles MacAbré (pronounced Ma-cá-brah to rhyme with candelabra or, even more appropriately, Abracadabra). He stood six foot six, with a frame to match. A huge man with penetrating blue eyes, swept back silver hair, and a huge pair of hands. He must certainly be a strangler. Second was the High Priestess, Comtesse Belladonna Ruskow (pronounced Rúsh-co, like a combination of Russia and Moscow). Old, thin, like an ancient ballerina left over from the Bolshoi. Always dressed in black, with a noticeable squint that gave to her look a double malice. She could only be a poisoner. Third was the Guardian, Dieter Düsseldorf (pronounced Dée-ter, short for "deterrent.") A reptilian creature with bulging eyes, that could readily grovel around the other two, but produced an air of slithering, hissing menace around himself for others, like a snake. His weapon, I was sure, must be a knife, perhaps with poison on the blade. He would strike from behind.

What did they want from me? What had they ever wanted from me, that I was drawn into their rituals, if only as an observer? Sir Charles had said something - something odd, unexpected, strangely out of place. Yes, that was it, "quite appropriate."

He had said it twice. With my name, O. Penner and my age, sixteen-and-a-half. Both had brought that odd, inappropriate response. Whatever it was these three wanted, I was now wide open. They knew my name and address and family arrangement, and with the answers on the form we had returned, everything else about me they could ever want to know. The situation I was in couldn't have felt more dire.

During the continuing course of that summer, my internal warning system had gone from yellow to orange to red to off-the-scale and collapsed. I shuffled round the house, in hiding, with no real aim any more. Then my mother received a letter asking for a change in appointment date due to administrative error – the new date was brought so far forward that it became the very next day. Fears vaguely bubbled around the letter, but a clerical error isn't too easy to get excited about. So, off we went the next day, back to Yew Tree House, where I actually read the plaques on the gatepost and learnt, from the very top one, that Doctor Sir Charles MacAbré was a founder and non-resident director of the clinic. “Non-resident” gave some relief, and a little hope, but I still shuddered as we entered, realising that when the cosmic forces want you, they are going to get you.

A nurse showed us into an office saying that the doctor would be along shortly. Then she returned and asked my mother to accompany her, to fill out some forms about my impact on everyday family life. They left. A door behind me opened. The therapist entered - I thought.

“Hello again, Oliver,” boomed the unforgettable voice of Sir Charles.

Large hands grasped my stooping shoulders, firmly but effortlessly, holding me in place.

“I've brought some old friends to see you.”

Comtesse Belladonna and Dieter, smirking, walked round the desk I was facing - and I didn't die. I had always felt that if things became too overwhelmingly terrifying, my heart would give way and I would be free. No chance. It let me down. It just kept on beating, impossibly fast and up in my throat, but it just kept on going.

All at once, Sir Charles, from behind me, moved his left hand down to my wrist pinning my hand, the Comtesse pulled a very ornate thin bladed dagger, stiletto I think its called, from the black lace frills on the front of her dress and Dieter laid a large black book, blocked in Latin in gold leaf, pages edged in red, open, on the desk in front of me and wiped my left thumb with cotton wool soused in alcohol. In another movement, the Comtesse had leaned forward and made a small cut on the base of my left thumb with the dagger, and Sir Charles, moving to my right side, taking a gold-tipped quill from his inside jacket pocket, had charged the pen with the blood from my thumb forcing it into my right hand and Dieter pointed to a dotted line at the bottom of a page of Latin script.

What else could I do? I signed my name in blood.

With a flourish, Dieter lightly blotted the page and closed the book. The Comtesse wiped her

blade and returned it to its concealed scabbard in the lace. Sir Charles wiped the nib of the pen and returned it to his pocket. The Comtesse and Dieter, carrying the book clutched to his chest, rounded the desk and left through the door behind me, by which time Sir Charles had very professionally cleansed my finger with another alcohol swab and put a plaster neatly over the cut. I had kept my eyes down, staring at the desk throughout, to avoid eye contact.

"Do you know what is special about today, Oliver?" he asked, but continued without waiting for an answer.

"There will be a full moon. You arrived in the world under a full moon. You are very fortunate being so born, when its gravitational pull augments that of the sun and draws the kundalini up towards the spiritual realm as it raises the tides of the seas. That was six times six times six full moons ago, making 216 times we have had a full moon since you were born, Oliver. You like numbers – thirteen full moons in a year, take off 130 for ten years leaves 86, take off 65, for five more years leaves 21, and another 13 for one more year leaves 8 over. Sixteen years and eight months ago was your nativity. That brings us nicely to today, and so to your own entry into 'The Book of Names.'"

Now I have to say, I didn't care much for this black arts business, but I had picked up a few of the buzz-words like the full moon and 666, so I cringed even more. Then he left. Soon my mother came back and asked if I had been seen. So when I answered "yes," we left. She never did ask about

the plaster on my left thumb.

The days moved on without any noticeable change. I tried to listen in to any further moves by the coven, but neither dream nor clairvoyance could pick anything. The start of the new term for higher education came and went without my participation. Then we received a letter from Yew Tree House saying that as we had missed the appointment with the therapist, I would be taken off their records as a non-attender and our GP would be informed of such. Another black mark against my name. My mother, having come to accept the status quo, had lost interest by then, so we let the matter drop. We never bothered to report the changed appointment date which we had attended.

Then, one evening, a chance phrase from the TV got me – human sacrifice. Suddenly, I was thrown into turmoil. So that was what they intended. I had seen a couple of chickens and a goat seemingly waiting to be slaughtered on the altar in dreams. Later, somebody had passed round a goblet... sick! I froze inside. The idea gripped me – consumed me – it just wasn't fair. Alright, I was a bit of a waste of space, but this went too far. My head was in a spin, my heart was in my throat again. As icing on the cake, an advert came on for Happy Halloween Treats. I recoiled in my chair. It reverberated in my screaming brain – Halloween... Halloween... Halloween. It was coming. It was the 29th of October, just two days to go until the biggest witches Sabbath of the year.

For the rest of that evening and that night, I listened inside my head for any show of activity

towards me. There was none. Maybe they were blanketing their thoughts or maybe their plans had been so well laid in advance that no communication was necessary on the point. To whom could I turn for help? How could I tell anyone that a coven of witches wanted to slaughter me and drink my blood for Halloween? I fell into apathy, I gave up. There was no point in fighting it. The next day I slouched round the house in a state of resignation. All was silent. The night of the 30th came and went, still silent. And then it was too late for help, it was the small hours of October 31st, Halloween. I collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

I woke late in the morning with a feeling of relief. Well, here was the day and nothing had happened. I felt a little bit stupid, having over-reacted the way I had, but better safe than sorry, as they say. The day moved on quietly. Lunch soon came and went. I began imagining a future life for me. Then I heard it. "Left here, into Exeter Road."

I was up on my feet, shoes on, running out the back door and climbing over the back wall, before I took breath. In the alley behind, I squeezed between the rows of sheds and garages and over the remnant chain-link fence, emerging into the scrubby common at the back. Keeping low, I ran as if my life depended on it. The voice had clearly been Dieter's. If I haven't mentioned it before, we were living in a cul-de-sac, just off Exeter Road. I kept running and keeping low, while the trees and bushes of the spinney that was well known to me, kept me covered. I was soon half a mile away from the house. Running in blind panic, the downhill route

by gravel path, sand, heather and moss, took me to a small, mouldering wooden bridge over the stream that bisected the common diagonally, out in the open but in a depression, definitely still out of sight.

Then I heard the baying of the dogs, big dogs - hounds. My heart leapt into my mouth again, while I leapt into the stream and started running helter-skelter down it. If it deepened, up to my knees, I waded. I was off my head. Brambles and then trees were soon around me, and I began to feel less exposed and very slightly less likely to get caught. I ran and waded and ran in a state of sickening dread until I knew I was approaching the other side of the common in the corner where the stream was piped under the road. If only I could get across the road unseen...

Stood on the edge of the road, looking down at me, were Sir Charles and Dieter. I stopped, bending double, rasping for breath. Running up behind me, one on each side of the stream, were two men in peaked caps, holding back two enormous bloodhounds, each. Coming in at me from each side of the thicket, I could hear more people. I was cornered and caught. Helped by the cold of the water, my bladder gave up the fight.

"Hello, Oliver," said Sir Charles. "I have just suggested to your mother that we would be taking you out for a Halloween treat, this evening, if she was agreeable. She said she thought it would do you the world of good."

I was led out of the stream and wrapped in a blanket and put into the back of a car. Dieter

climbed in the front, next to the driver, chortling in a menacing way. A girl got in beside me, late teenage, quite pretty, and held my hand.

"That was a bit of a chase," she giggled, "and you're our star attraction."

Dieter shot her a look with daggers in it over his shoulder, and she reddened and was quiet. I could imagine what sort of star – a shooting star – a meteorite. Gone in a flash. The car pulled away, part of a small convoy, heading for the open countryside. In front was a large, luxury car with Sir Charles' bulk clearly showing in the rear seat, then it was us, then a minibus full of bobbing heads and then a small van, where surely the dogs were being conveyed. We travelled for some miles. Inside the blanket, I was shaking violently with cold and fear. At some point the girl squeezed my hand and whispered.

"My name's Danse. Spelt with an "s," in the French style. I'm just a Neophyte. Don't be scared, Oliver, it won't hurt."

"So I'm going to be sedated first," I thought, not to wriggle on their altar, or defile it.

Finally, the light began to wane in the sky, night couldn't be far off, and what night! Halloween!! Our column of vehicles swung off the country lane and in through some impressive manorial gates. The tyres scrunched on the gravel as the cars, passing the lodge, ran up the drive to the big house. Sir Charles alighted agilely from his car, and we all clambered out of ours, Dieter groaning with the effort.

“Take Oliver for the ritual ablution, Dear,” ordered Sir Charles.

“Yes, Daddy,” answered Danse, taking my hand.

So she was Sir Charles' daughter. Danse MacAbré. The Dance of Death. The mind boggles, even from the state I was in. She led me to a palatial down-stairs bathroom and started running a bath. From a lockable cabinet in the corner she added various measured amounts of variously coloured powders. Then she turned to help me off with my clothes. As she took the blanket she giggled seeing that I had also managed to disgrace myself in the stream.

“Hurry,” she said, “jump in, before Dieter comes to check. We shouldn't really talk, it could spoil the purification.”

When Dieter appeared round the corner of the door, I was sat safely in the bath, and Danse was rubbing me down with a large block of queer-smelling soap. His bulging eyes opened even wider and he was simpering with excitement as he withdrew. Danse helped me out of the bath, towelled me off and dressed me in a long, white, linen smock with white canvas, backless slippers for my feet. I ought to add at this point that although I was naked in front of such a lovely girl, I was well past having to fear any reaction. Desire, love, trust, embarrassment, fear, anger, hatred – all were strangers to me. I was a lamb being led to the slaughter. Danse, turning her back to me and having slipped out of her pleasant, print dress, took a white, silk robe from a peg on the back of the door

and put it on.

"There," she said. "Now, we match."

I didn't quite think linen and silk matched even if they were both white, but looking into her innocent blue eyes I couldn't find a dissenting voice, just a hint of a conspiratorial smile.

Back out in the grand entrance hall people were assembling, talking excitedly in groups. We were approached by a woman in a red gown carrying a tray with two drinks on it. The smaller glass was given to Danse, while a tall, fluted glass containing who-knows-what various herbs, was given to me. Must be the sedative, I thought, in a detached way. Across the hall, I caught sight of the Comtesse Belladonna Ruskow, in a black silk gown, watching me with one of her malicious eyes. One of her poisonous brews, surely.

"Drink up," said Danse. "It's an important part of the purification ritual."

I tried to imagine her shock and horror when she would finally realise what they had done to me on the altar, but it pained me too much. Then I tried to imagine my shock and horror. I didn't know which was worse to bear. I drank up.

Sir Charles approached, with Dieter slithering along behind.

"It's nearly time," he said. "Oliver, this is the culmination of your life. This is what you were born to do. We have been aware of you for many years on the Astral, but now the hour of your fulfilment is approaching."

I didn't faint, honestly. Culmination of your life – born to do – your hour approaches – I accepted it all with a stoic fatality. Besides, Danse was looking so proud of me. Dieter was sliding by in his usual stoop with his hands behind his back, and I saw that he was carrying a board with a list of names on it. Near the front door, he turned to Sir Charles:

"I'll get the fire started," he hissed, venomously, and left.

A bulb came on in my head. So that was it. No quick slicing of the throat on the altar, they intended to burn me alive, outside, on a bonfire, and it wasn't even November 5th. I went weak at the knees and Danse, realising, held me tightly to support me, and embarrassed for her, I kept up on my feet. Sir Charles had turned his back to us, and was preparing to address the assembly gathered there. About twenty of them in total, mostly in black robes, although some in red and a few without robes at all. A hush fell. All eyes were on Sir Charles.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Tonight, we will be privileged to attempt to bring back to Earth the Old Ones, the fabled Gods of Antiquity. Under Azathoth, the blind, idiot God who sits at the centre of the Universe, these primordial Gods with names such as Ny-ar-la-tho-tep, known also as the Crawling Chaos have been away from our Earth for far too long.

"We have been very fortunate in acquiring the services of an unique psychic entity, who will be sent, tonight, into that Realm of the Dead as a ransom, to send back to us, in return, an ambassador

of the fabled Old Ones. This 'Opener-of-the-Way' with his unrivalled consciousness will rend the fabric of Space-Time and establish an astral bridge to the Other World, across which, one of the Old Ones will travel."

Guests murmured and marvelled. Danse giggled. "That's you, he means," she whispered in my ear.

I could only ponder on how dreadful it might be to enter the Realm of the Dead as a ransom for any of the Old Ones.

All eyes turned towards us as a whisper ran round the hall, gradually gathering in force.

"The Opener-of-the-Way... the Opener-of-the-Way..." Why did my name have to be O Penner...?

Following the gargantuan, gown-swirling lead of Sir Charles and the petite Comtesse, the group began to sweep outside with the two of us hemmed in at the centre. During the time we had been inside it had become totally dark. Turning towards the right, the group moved expectantly into the trees beside the house where the orange glow of a moderate bonfire could be seen. Backlit by the orange-red glow of the fire, like a daemon in Hell, Dieter could be seen checking off names on his list as the group approached. He glistened amphibiously in the flickering light.

Some of the black robed people took up their allotted stations around the fire, and Sir Charles started intoning some incantations with his deep, powerful voice. Then Dieter invited, with menace, the others, including Danse to form a semicircle just beyond the action, facing, over the fire, Sir Charles,

who then had more strange words to say, probably in Latin. Then it was my turn. Dieter came for me and stationed me on one side of the fire. More pompous incomprehensibles came out of Sir Charles as he threw a handful of something on the fire that made it flare up in blues and greens.

"The Opener-of-the-Way will now jump over the sacred fire and while he is in the air a rift in the curtain that separates our world from the Netherworld will be created and the bridge between these two worlds will be established."

More mumbus-jumbus and a general chant began to swell,

"The Opener-of-the-Way... the Opener-of-the-Way..."

Sir Charles nodded at me, meaningfully. Clearly, it was my time for action. I wondered how I was supposed to manage a run-and-jump in backless canvas slippers and full-length linen smock, but Dieter was rapidly approaching me from behind, looking even more menacing than usual. I could imagine the threat of the poisoned point of cold steel that would be poised to pierce me. With my eyes on the lovely Danse, I rushed the three steps to the fire and launched myself into space...

PART 2

...and a motherly voice asked, “Hello, who are you?”

It was definitely a change of scene - no fire, no coven, but also no Danse. I appeared to be contained within a large, transparent bubble. What was through the bubble, on the outside, was visible to me, but incomprehensible. Looking down at myself, was also not within the limits of acceptability, as I knew them.

I tried to answer my interrogator. “Oliver,” I said out loud, but the sound on my ears, if I actually had any, was like the howling of twenty wolves falling off a cliff.

“You don't need to speak with the voice, just think it with intent and I shall hear you.”

“I am sorry,” I thought, with the intention of being heard by the speaker. “My name is Oliver.”

“Well done, Oliver. You're quick witted, with quite some telepathic development, already.”

“Thank you, but, if I may ask, who are you? Where am I?”

“To answer, satisfactorily, these two simple sounding questions, it will be necessary to stand your image of the universe on its head. Can I

assume from your presence here that you are prepared to have your entire, misinformed view of the nature of things ripped apart and reassembled into a more universally acceptable form?"

What else could I say? "Yes."

"Good. So first we must start with your planet. It is a nice size, good temperature range, plenty of water and, now, a good supply of free oxygen. We colonised it many waves ago. You, and everything else living on the planet, has evolved from one of us depositing a quantity of living biomass on the formerly barren surface. How exactly this deposit is made is not important now, but be assured that all life on that Earth, as you call it, comes from the direct intercession of creatures from deep space."

My interest was being caught. Although I was bothered about having lost contact with Danse, this idea of creatures from space seeding life on the Earth was tickling me, drawing my attention.

"All planets are, in fact, seeded in this way. That is how planetary life spreads outwards across the Galaxy. From your mind I can read that you have a vague idea about Azathoth, a blind, idiot god who sits at the centre of the Universe. Actually, its not the centre of the Universe, just the centre of our Galaxy, but as we are going that way, you will be able to see Him for yourself in all His glory."

Now I was off to see Azathoth at the centre of the Galaxy. What had Sir Charles done to me? I must have been doped out of my tiny mind by that herbal concoction of Comtesse Belladonna.

"You are letting your previous, erroneous thought

patterns clog up your mind, Oliver. You have to let them go. They cannot assist you in any way out here. This is your only reality now."

I visualised Danse, looking so sweet. "How long will this journey take?"

"In your terms, it will be many thousands of years. For us, travellers in the interstellar spaces, time is perceived differently."

I thought again of Danse. Such a short acquaintance. She would be long gone by the time we returned to Earth, if we ever did return. As Sir Charles had said, I was to be a ransom, lost in space, while some crawling chaos was creating havoc on Earth in my place. I sobbed, the noise was awful coming out of my newly acquired alien throat.

"Cheer up. All planet-bound intellects have a profound shock when they first realise where they are. You are a pick-up. Your entire mind-set has been captured and transferred to the brain of one of my children, Nyarlathotep. He is developing in my secondary womb, the air womb, which is the most like your planetary environment. He doesn't mind taking a back seat in his brain, for a while, as it gives him a chance to study life on a planet from a first-hand perspective. You may feel him flicking through your memories at times, but don't worry, the process is completely non-destructive and in return you have uncensored use of his body."

"Ga-ga. That's it. The strain has been too much. I've cracked up. Reverted back to imbecility as a defence," was all I could think.

“Ha ha ha...” A tinkling laughter echoed though me, thrilling my being. “I'm sorry, but I see we have a long way to go with your re-education, so perhaps we should begin with some basic definitions. To your understanding, all life on Earth is connected, genetically. That is quite true as far as it goes. However, all life in the Galaxy is genetically connected, because all being begins with, and emanates from, our Lord, Azathoth.

“To you, all life on Earth is divided into two parts, water-based and land-based. This is wrong thinking. A starfish which lays on the bottom of the sea is also land-based, as it never leaves its solid floor. It is wet-land-based though, not dry-land-based. So the two categorisations of creatures are being muddled together. Firstly, we have the great division of water-based and air-based life dependant on the medium the creature needs to live in, and secondly, a lesser developmental division into land-based, that is immovable, and free roaming. So we drop the idea of land-based and replace it with air-based. Then we can view all three main divisions of life as water-based, air-based and vacuum-based – like me.

“All life begins in water. Air-based embryos, like you, still grow in water in their mothers' wombs, and vacuum-based life has two wombs, a small one of water inside the main one of air. You are now in my second type.”

It made sense to me, but I was a long way from home.

“So now, perhaps I can answer your two

questions. First, who am I? I am a deep-space traveller of vacuum-based life, moving back in towards the Galactic Core. You can think of me as being called Greenwings. Second, where are you? You are inhabiting, temporarily, the body of my son, Nyarlathotep, who is in my air-womb. You are, therefore, travelling towards the Galactic Core as well. This journey will take many millennia, but your rate of consciousness is not the same as it was on Earth. Incidentally, Nyarlathotep as a name is the male nominative form of Greenwings."

"Air-wombs are transparent so our developing children can see their universe around them. If you will begin to concentrate on the complete vision of my son's eyes and bring their images into focus, you should be able to see the Galaxy, the Milky Way as you call it, stretching all around you."

Greenwings stopped talking. The vibe or hum of psychic connection stopped and I guessed I was left on my own with the task of linking up more correctly to the senses of this alien body. As I tried to fit myself in behind the eyes, I felt my hand move out and grasp a blob of something roundish and bring it to my mouth, which started eating it. Clearly, Nyarlathotep was still in charge of the body, and would deal with bodily functions, which was useful to know, but this action also aided me in attuning more completely to his body. I could almost taste the "fruitiness," feel it between my "fingers," if one could ever call such tentacles fingers.

"What you are eating is a product of my body. We secrete a thick fluid for babies in the water

womb and these blobs of tasty pulp for our children in the air womb."

I eventually realised that Nyarlathotep's eyes had a much larger field of view than ours, but were stereoscopic at the centre front. They could also see a much larger spectrum of colours surely from infra-red to ultra-violet plus some other wavelengths for which I had no name. Gradually, my mind, amazingly, did accept the foreign electrical impulses and interpret them as a picture of my surroundings. By concentrating on infinity, I was able to bring into focus the broad sweep of the Milky Way, as its stars almost completely surrounded us. They looked so beautiful, and their commitment to being seen was so total, that their light filled the whole of space, so that only by looking away from the plane of our Galaxy could I see any apparently empty blackness. Otherwise, everywhere I looked, there were interpenetrating clouds of colour, pinpointed with brilliant sparks of strange and various hues and intensities. It was an overwhelming sight, I felt humbled by it. How could anyone ever feel alone in space with all this living beauty surrounding them? I gazed reverentially. The centre of the Galaxy couldn't be missed. It out-shone, out-glistened and out-mesmerised me with its awesomeness. And, Wow! we were heading that way, we were actually going there.

"I need to correct your ideas about the spectrum of colour, Oliver. You are used to a limited range. You have been taught that between red and green is the colour yellow. This is not so. The "colour" you

consider as yellow is actually just the admixture of red and green from those colour receptors in your eyes. You have no receptor for the true, let us call it, "proto-yellow." However, as you now look through Nyarlathotep's eyes, you will be able to see the full spectrum of five unique colours – red, proto-yellow, green, blue and violet, sensed with the full set of five receptor cones. A primitive colour wheel based on three primary colours is necessarily flat because three points always lie in a plane. That is why your stools, tripods and easels have three legs, they are stable regardless of the unevenness of the ground. So half way along a line between red and green is also on the colour wheel giving your primitive yellow. However, with the full five primary colours the colour wheel is not in a plane, it twists through three dimensions, so half way along a line from red to green falls off the wheel giving a false impression of colour, and the glory of proto-yellow is completely missed."

As I continued to gaze out into space, there were indeed flashes of an unknown colour, as striking to the mind as red and as bright in the eye as yellow, but without actually being either. It was a new colour, a colour out of space. Through these new eyes, the true octave, or should it be "sextave" of the colours unfolded before me, from the least energetic red through proto-yellow, green and blue to the fastest vibrating violet which was similar enough to our own violet to be understood. The colours didn't stop there though, a new sextave with greater energy began, having colours that I can only describe as fluorescent or incandescent, sparkling

round the five-fold spectrum again. Below the red, however, was another sextave of what I could call iridescent colours such as those on a birds plumage or a soap bubble or when spilt petrol sits on a puddle. In Nyarlathotep's vision these fifteen colours were distinct from each other but further down the spectrum were also thermal and gravitational receptors and higher up receptors for x-rays and cosmic rays. All these inputs merged and blended to give my host his incredible sight.

"I see you are getting the hang of it," said Greenwings, "eyes are quite primitive sense organs. Your earthly, air-based eyes still have to live under a layer of water to protect them. Our eyes are equivalently sensitive, and have a layer of water and a layer of air, to protect them, each in a clear film of tissue that constitutes a lens. By manipulating these paired lenses we are able to produce some striking telescopic effects. Nyarlathotep, who has two eyes like you, but complex sensors and lensing like me, will now show you something that will interest you."

A spark of intercommunication flashed by me, and very slowly, Nyarlathotep, turned "our" body round to face the other way. I was able to follow the slow change of position and so still keep the outer view in focus. There were many fewer stars in this direction but the wide spectrum of light and the wide angle of view still made for a glorious panorama. Then, slowly again, the stars began to move towards us. Were we going backwards? But no, Nyarlathotep was winding up his telescopic sight. Slowly, the centre of vision move downwards

and to the right, while all the time the stars were appearing to move closer to us, until it came to rest on a small, white star. He locked onto this star and it crept closer. A planet showed palely, then another, with the strange tint of blue of a gas giant, then another, with rings, then another, with a red spot. My attention was riveted. In closer the view went, to a small dark red planet, then again, another small speck of a planet, but blue, such a lovely, pretty blue, alive like a sparkling sapphire lying on a black velvet cloth. I couldn't help but be reminded of Danse and her lovely blue eyes, that had not, at least, had to endure the sight of me being burnt at the stake. That was the Earth hanging minutely there in space with her sisters, circling our sun, seen from millions of miles out in space. I was dumb-struck. The telescopic sight had reached it limit. On the top and bottom of our world, small magnetic radiations could be seen with the enhanced vision, that played around the poles like some ethereal feelers, while, stretched out around it, billowing sheets of particles faintly showed dancing like skirts and aprons on the sub-atomic wind from the sun. I watched and watched, enthralled, until Nyarlathotep became bored with it, I suppose, and we slowly returned to normal vision, while turning back towards the Galactic centre.

“To return to the wrong concept of land-based creatures, your species is land-based to me, because you cannot leap from your planet's surface, whereas a fish or a bird is free roaming, as they can move in three-dimensional space within their medium. There is even a fungus that lives on asteroids and

meteors flying around in deep space, feeding off the contained minerals and waiting to fall onto a planet. That space-travelling fungus would, however, have to be defined as land-based, because it has no more ability to move itself than one of your terrestrial trees.

"So that bring us back to our three cases, water-based, air-based and vacuum-based. You are, in your usual form, air-based, so when your intellect was thrown or projected into space, it was naturally fitted into Nyarlathotep, who is also air-based at the moment. Once upon a time, he was water-based and in my appropriate water-womb, then he was born from there into this air-womb, eventually he will become vacuum-based like me and I will give birth to him into the vacuum of space, and continue to guide him through his early years.

"Before I go further, I had better explain that the words I use to talk to you have been taken from your own knowledge of things, so they shouldn't exceed your understanding. The concepts of spoken language are universal – 1st, 2nd or 3rd person; singular/plural; noun, verb and adjective. Apart from a million idiomatic differences, all higher creatures can communicate together mentally. I also see that you have picked some ideas from me in the past. The idea of theocracy, you once had, as the only sensible form of government, for instance. In truth, it is an anarchy because there is no spiritual leader or any leader at all. Each being confidently acts in the way it finds right at the time, being tacitly guided from within by Azathoth, and all mesh perfectly together.

“Not that this system could ever operate on Earth. As the ruling species you people are far too corrupt to begin to contemplate it. A complete spiritual awakening would be required. You are well out of it, Oliver.”

So that was it. I had been ejected from my body to avoid, like Lot, the coming doom. But what about Danse? She hadn't even had the chance to be turned into a pillar of salt while, in my place, the Crawling Chaos, like a super-charged white blood cell, ate its way through the corruption called humanity. I was devastated.

“Poor Oliver. Compose yourself. That life is far behind you now.

“One big question you must have had goes right to the core of the problem from your point of view. How can anything live in deep space?”

“Yes,” I replied, recovering, and couldn't help laughing. The twenty wolves howled from our throat, and made Nyarlathotep jump as he was wading through my junior school memories. “Sorry,” I said in thought, half to him and half to Greenwings, “I laughed out loud.”

“The solution,” Greenwings continued, “needs to be formed step by step. Speaking generally, a water-based or air-based creature grows by feeding from its environment, it takes in the necessary gases, liquids, solids and energy to create more of itself, either by growing bigger or having young. They can be divided into two types, plant and animal. The plant takes in carbon dioxide and energy and makes biomass and oxygen, the animal

takes in plant or animal tissue, oxygen and energy and makes more biomass and carbon dioxide. Together, on a planet near a sun as a source of energy, they may both survive in harmony.

"However, and this is a monumental however, from a planet they do not ever evolve into the third form of life, the vacuum-based. The third form of life is, in fact, the original form. All other life forms are degenerations of it. Azathoth, He-who-sits-at-the-centre-of-the-galaxy, first creates vacuum-based life in His own image. This then flies out amongst the planets and, where necessary, seeds life. However, that is a rudimentary, degenerate life being merely water or air based, with individuals that could never evolve back into one of us of the vacuum.

"To explain further, we are composed of mineral, plant and animal parts, working harmoniously together. We need, here, to dispense with any idea of the scale of an adult vacuum-based creature, suffice it to say that we are larger than anything that could exist on a planet, living in either gas or liquid, because, out here, we have no strong gravitational forces to contend with. In shape, we are long and spindly, a bit like a cob after you have eaten all the corn, and have five very large, but thin, vertical wings spaced symmetrically around us. They retract into longitudinal slits along our bodies. There are also many various structures, organs and some bubbles of gas or fluid dotted about. Right now, because I am pregnant, you are in a large bubble filled with air for Nyarlathotep to be able to breathe and look around."

As the description of Greenwings entered my mind, I was reminded of the view of Earth from deep space. Amazingly, our planet, with its discreet areas of land and sea, tentacular auroras and wing-like skirts and aprons, had resembled a squashed, oblate copy of this creature.

“Well done, Oliver, that is an intelligent observation. You are very perceptive. This whole existence of ours is only possible through the total recycling of all substances within the body. The only resource taken from outside of ourselves is some energy, needed, of course, to power all the processes. To give you one example, and perhaps the most important, our haemoglobin which takes up oxygen to power the animal areas, is chemically stripped of its iron, which is replaced by magnesium, and turned into chlorophyll which powers the plant areas and creates oxygen. This chlorophyll is mainly used in the wings, hence we all have variants on the name of Greenwings.”

I suppose my thinking just stopped at this point – overloaded. Greenwings didn't say anything further for some time, while I was in a daze. It was quite straightforward really, but mind-boggling. It went round and round in my head – Nyarlathotep's head. Haemoglobin turns into chlorophyll and then chlorophyll turns back into haemoglobin and we start all over again. Now that is what I call a circulation. A gigantic brownish animal body with green vegetable wings. Simple really.

“Buried deep along the lengths of our bodies, following our five-sided symmetry, are the major vessels, running side by side, of blood and sap, and

between them, also along the full length are little organs that do the exchange of metals, turning blood into sap and sap into blood. Side shoots from these major vessels take the fluids all over our bodies to the various organs where they are needed and bring the spent fluid back to be recharged.

"Near these little organs of exchange are deposits of the two metals waiting to be reused by the opposite process. That is, atoms of iron stripped from the haemoglobin in one circulatory vessel, are stored in metallic form before being put into the stripped chlorophyll in the other vessel. The same applies to the magnesium in reverse. This gives us pairs of nodular 'wires' of pure metal running the full lengths of our bodies. That is, five bi-metal strips. These are essential to our lives. With these we are able to navigate in space as we are able to use the strips to sense most of the electromagnetic spectrum, gravity waves and cosmic rays that surround us. We also use the strips as antenna for communication. Actually, your intellect was picked up, by me, in this way as it shot through space and I transferred it into Nyarlathotep."

I could see that Sir Charles' ritual had ejected me from my body out into space, but what could have been lurking out there ready to take my place? Not Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, because he was still here, attacking my memories. Then again this one was young, he couldn't be <u>the</u> Nyarlathotep of the Elder Gods. I could, by then, only idly wonder, because, in truth, my interest was being drawn deeper and deeper into the on-going analysis of this outrageously novel, yet reportedly original, form of

existence.

“We have a central nervous system, of course. Five of them, in fact, travelling the full length of our bodies, interlinked with each other and branching outwards at various “vertebral” levels to connect with our internal organs, from our five brain lobes downwards. We have no spines protecting them, however. Our support system is neither spinal, like yours, or exoskeletal, like insects or lobsters, it is superior to both. We have an intricate cylindrical cage of intersecting “ribs” at depth within us, that both supports our outer tissues and protects the more delicate inner ones.

However, this five-fold symmetry is the big difference between water or air creatures and us of the vacuum. Your symmetry is reflective, one half of your body is a reflected copy of the other half - two eyes, two arms and two legs. We have a circular symmetry. Each of our five sections is a rotated copy of the others. Five spinal-cords, although we don't actually have the spines around them, five bi-metal strips and five wings. Not all organs are repeated five times though, there is specialisation, just as you only have one liver and your left lung is missing a lobe to make room for your one heart in your chest.

“At the top of this corn cob body of ours is a head end, where we have, in a ring, our five eyes which are not over-used in deep space, because of the wealth of information we receive from our network of bi-metal strips. Just below the eyes are five short tentacles, that can be considered as our hands, which are also rarely used. At the other end, is

another ring of feelers, like our legs, and finally our genitalia. There is no excretion as an adult of course, because as we have to be utterly self-sufficient, during the millennia we spend out here in deep-space, nothing can be afforded to be lost.

"This next part I want Nyarlathotep to hear, as well."

I felt a quick message shoot past my understanding and an inner jolt as he shifted from rifling through my memories to listen.

"When we mate, its done in deep space. Through prior approaches and intercommunications at a distance, three of us come together. In a very delicate and emotional process, we reverse into each other until our bottom ends meet, creating a three-pointed star. The five small feelers, I have called legs, in a circle at our lowest points are used to steady us in position and gently stimulate each other. So if we can refer to these three beings as A, B and C, the function proceeds like this: A, being stimulated by both B and C, lays an egg into the net of intertwining feelers, B, stimulated by A and C, takes it in and fertilises it and passes it to C, who stimulated by A and B, draws it into her water-womb. Then with more stimulation B lays an egg, C fertilises it and A takes it into her water-womb. Finally, of course, C lays, A fertilises and B takes it in. Then with more emotional petting from their feelers, the three separate. From this you will, obviously, understand that we are all hermaphrodites.

"I said earlier that Nyarlathotep is the male

nominative form of Greenwings, which it is. All our children living in our wombs of water or air are male, because they are not using all their genes. Some genes are given from egg and sperm, which allow the child to develop up to puberty in wombs, but then genes from the womb-mother which contain her racial history switch on and take the child into and through puberty into adult, vacuum life while telepathically she instructs the youngster in her concentrated life experience. As you can imagine, it is a huge shift for us to metamorphose from a simplistic mirror symmetry to the perfected beauty of five-fold rotational symmetry."

I tried to imagine being melted down and reformed as a giant cigar. Where does one begin?

Again a high-speed conversation sped by me before Greenwings continued. "Nyarlathotep is approaching puberty, the time when this change will come upon him, and we will need to be near the Galactic core at that point to avail ourselves of the increase in radiant energy from the tightly massed stars. The change is a very private matter, so I am afraid you will have to leave us before then, Oliver. However, Nyarlathotep has agreed for me to give you both a brief outline of how the event will take place.

"First, there is a blotching and hardening of the skin of the back, especially down the centre line. Then it begins to crack open and slowly peel back as more and more tissue rises from the fissure. The process is not without pain, but nature keeps that within bounds. The erupting tissue continues to increase in volume until four similitudes of the front

half of the original body have plumped out the back. Next, starting from the head, a monumental repositioning of organs, vessels and nerves takes place, sweeping down the whole length of the body. Supporting “ribs” strengthen our structure, spinal-cord connections dissolve and reconnect at each level until the five-fold nerve highway and its side shoots is attained, wings are grown in place, rudimentary bi-metal strips deposited and wombs developed. Meanwhile with the increase of knowledge pouring in from the until-then-latent womb-mother's genes and teaching, there is a complete revolution in both the conscious and unconscious psyche of the newly emerging adult.”

Nyarlathotep's attention had been absolute, completely riveted. I felt a shiver run through my temporary body at the description, but could not be sure which of the two us had initiated this tremor. With this final intimate revelation of deep-space puberty the lesson ended.

Gradually, I became aware of the swelling of a strange “sound” all around us. It sounded like a great throng, a thousand distant voices, singing in delight, purely for the joy of it, beautifully. “Tekeli-li,” it came, wafting from the depths of space. Its antiphon came from a myriad of “throats” closer by, “Tekeli-li,” accompanying and amplifying it. Surely, this was the Music of the Spheres, majestic and magically hypnotic, overwhelming me with its melodiousness. Running up and down an extended keyboard of harmonies, discrete sounds and cadences lovingly fell, one over another, enhancing and augmenting. Squeaking and popping overtones

and moaning, rumbling undertones were merging symphonically, flawlessly. “Tekeli-li,” responded Greenwings, deafeningly. “Tekeli-li,” added Nyarlathotep, overloading our already over-sensitised nervous system with sparkling electrical energy that rippled throughout our shared being. As I struggled to compose myself, the wave moved sedately on, seeming to lessen gradually as it went, until eventually it had passed into the far distance and out of “earshot.”

“Our galactic sisters' heavenly greeting,” explained Greenwings. “It has circulated continuously around the entire galaxy from the beginning of time. A wealth of information is carried on that wave, to be shared by us all. We hear of who is courting whom, who has been newly born into the vacuum and who is preparing to yield up this life and return to the bosom of Azathoth. We hear of cosmic events and possible disasters in far-flung reaches of our spiral, where feeding may be good or which parts are to be temporarily avoided. It is not really “sound,” of course, out here in space there is no sound, but it translates as sound to your understanding.” I was struck dumb, overawed, belittled. I felt like an ant crawling under the feet of giants.

“It's time to adjust my wings,” said Greenwings. “As we are moving in towards the galactic core, the radiant pressure is against us, producing a force into our faces. I need to tack against this cosmic wind in a circular fashion to spiral in and avoid being slowed down.”

Through the wide-angle eyes of my host, I could

see the huge green sheets, decorated with complex veining, being selectively furled and unfurled alongside and below us. This manoeuvre could have been easier, I think, but Greenwings clearly didn't want to obscure our view of the centre of the Galaxy. In truth, it was a stupendous sight. Half the forward view, now, was taken up by a fireball of blinding brightness. Yet not a fireball, there were no flames, no smudges of colour, just an enormity of tiny sparks of coloured light, myriads of them, each overlaying and being overlaid until they all merged into a shining, iridescent pool where each molecule of water was a separate, shimmering star. Shimmering, however, not as stars awkwardly shimmer through our atmosphere, but with a much faster, living shimmer of the pure joy of being.

"As I mentioned earlier, inside us we have that lacy skeletal structure of silicate, like some of your sea-sponges possess, which is impregnated with all the various trace minerals we could need. We also have chambers of liquids and gases used in our bodily processes – nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide and water. Waste matter produced by our animal tissue is fed to bacteria in special chambers where it is digested and turned into a compost which is then piped to our plant tissues. The over-growth of this plant tissue is then piped to the animal tissue where some is fed directly to it, and some is fed to internal vats of single celled organisms before they, instead, are fed to the animal tissue."

At this point I had a question. "That is all very well for a fully adult creature like you, Greenwings, to perpetuate itself, but what does Nyarlathotep do

to grow to full size when he first becomes a vacuum-based entity?"

"It is true that I have glossed over that bit to stress some other more important points. We are scavengers. We do, in fact, have a mouth within the feelers at the very top of our bodies capable of ingesting any useful organic or non-organic debris we come across. One of my first jobs when Nyarlathotep is born into the vacuum will be to take him on a feeding trip to build up him/her, he will, of course, be an hermaphrodite by then. We also have five openings around our bodies to release undesirable elements of a toxic nature when we are young. However, this is minimal, and the major concept of self-sufficiency stands. Our wings, with their networks of capillaries and veins and nerves, when outstretched into the latent energy flows of deep space, are able through absorption to supply all the photons needed to create the extra plant matter and oxygen which our animal tissue needs to grow, plus empower all our energy requirements. Any excess of energy can be stored chemically, like in a battery, for later use by our entire bodies.

"But I can see forming in your mind a question which you have not been able to shape into a clear thought. As explained, vacuum-based life can be happily continuing on into the future, living and reproducing itself out in deep space. Your question is - 'Where did the first of our kind come from?'"

"Yes, that's it." A confusion had been lifted from my mind.

"Then I had better say, as a preamble, that this is

not a finished operation. It's not like your story of Adam and Eve, that only happens once, this process still continues. It is only our Creator, our Demiurge, Azathoth, He-who-sits-at-the-centre-of-the-galaxy, who has the power to continuously create the only superior life-forms of this stellar spiral. A life-form from which all others are a mere degeneration. We bud-off directly from the limbs of Azathoth, we are truly His children, and when we die we return to Him, and then we retrograde into the planet bound creatures."

"And how exactly do you manage that?" I asked, smarting at Greenwings' sudden turn of pomposity.

"I would rather not tell you, at the moment. It will be much better for you to see the process in action for yourself. The time is approaching when our paths will have to separate. Nyarlathotep's change is coming closer. Shortly after the birth, I will need to turn away from the galactic core, to lead him/her up a particular spiral arm where the feeding on planetary remnants is reportedly good."

Thinking I might not like the answer, I didn't dare ask Greenwings to be more specific. Anyway, the idea of leaving was painful to me. I hadn't considered the eventuality of parting from Greenwings and Nyarlathotep. In fact, I marvelled at the thought that I had never even considered the possibility that these lodgings could ever come to an end.

"Soon, we will be close enough for you to be able to watch the Holy Azathoth in one of the most sacred acts of creation, and I will talk you through

what exactly you will be looking at."

As I looked towards the core in front of us, I realised that it now covered the whole hemisphere of view ahead. Some detail had become visible right in the centre, a thinning of the stars, a million specks of light had parted, to reveal a distant, gigantic, spherical form.

"That," said Greenwings, "Is the Great Central Ocean. It is composed of concentric layers of liquefied gas, the outer being of hydrogen and the inner being commensurate with Holy Azathoth, Himself."

While I watched, the view began to jump towards me and I realised that Nyarlathotep had begun to wind up the telephoto lenses in his eyes. Slowly the image of the central ocean grew until it filled our field of vision and then I could see the vastness of it. The hydrogen in the outside layer was very volatile, and because of motions I will describe shortly, was in a state of constant flux, with huge waves flowing around it. Where two waves met a breaker would appear throwing a vast sheet of liquefied gas out into space as a hydrogen cloud. The inner layer was glowing ominously with a green light that suggested radio-activity, but it wasn't quiescent as a sphere, it had many fingers stretching out into the higher layers, but no, not fingers exactly – tentacles, which moved through the bands of the lesser liquids as if under some conscious guidance. So this was Azathoth.

"Correct. This is our Demiurge, Azathoth, Lord of the Galaxy. He is considered 'blind,' not because

He has no eyes, which He doesn't, but because, like your figure of Justice, He creates us and rules over us all with absolute impartiality, without bias. He is called 'idiot,' not because He is mindless, but because He unswervingly follows 'The Law', that set of immutable mathematical rules 'carved in stone' at the beginning of Time, upon which the sum total of our Universe was created and rests.

"His throne is a white-hole. That is the other end of a worm-hole in the fabric of space-time, which stretches from a black-hole in a distant corner of the universe. From this white-hole the liquefied remains of constellations, gas clouds, star systems and energy pour out into our expanding galaxy from that distant black-hole into which they were absorbed having been disintegrated and dissolved by its tidal forces.

"From this 'soup' of debris from former systems, Azathoth, creates fresh, young stars to fill the otherwise empty space at the centre of our blossoming galaxy, and also creates the beings who will inhabit their systems, as you will soon see for yourself. These arms you can see moving through the layers of liquefied gas are gathering and uniting the materials necessary to form new stars and then project them into space in the patterns of clusters and constellations and gas clouds that give our spiral galaxy its distinctive form."

As I looked, I could indeed see specks of light spiralling away from the Central Ocean. Well, that all seemed very clear and sane, not quite the blind, idiot God that Sir Charles had imagined, that was capable of sending men off gibbering with the mere

sight or even mention of it.

"Also from this process of creation, Azathoth is able to fashion diverse creatures and imbue them with life. A relatively small cell, like one of your sperm cells, buds off from a limb of Azathoth, too small to be seen from here, and diving in and out of the various liquid gas layers takes on substance to form its young body before swimming up and out of the Ocean into free space. This process is divinely managed to ensure the numbers are as required. The most important of these forms is ours, the green-winged, that is, not yours. No, what will interest you is of a very different kind. We will need to look more closely at the core."

As Greenwings finished, the view magnified until the whole of our vision was consumed by the magnitude of the core. There, in the centre of our view was a glowing, green tip of a tentacle, just about to protrude out through one of the inmost layers.

"What Nyarlathotep is showing you, now, is an act of creation that will concern you, personally."

As we watched, the tip of the arm broke through the layer of liquefied gas it was in, and small particles on the surface of this layer began to gather round it. As the arm slowly protruded more, more and more tiny pieces of matter attached themselves around it, floating as they were on the top of the more viscous liquid. They had quickly formed a ring around the tip, and as the arm pushed further out through the surface, the ring of particles was

forced to expand and yet became thicker and deeper and denser as more particles rushed in to join. They had an effect like a vibrational movement which seemed to make them jostle for position in the resultant structure just to be able to be touching Holy Azathoth's tentacle. Finally, the process appeared to be complete, no further movement took place. Suddenly, the arm began to withdraw back in towards the centre, pulling the surface and the ring of debris down with it. With an almost audible "twang" the ring was detached from the arm by the increase of pressure in the deeper layer of liquid which catapulted the ring upwards and outwards. As the tentacle completely withdrew, the torus of detritus was catapulted through the next layer of liquefied gas, then the next, then the next, until it was out of the hydrogen at the top and spinning and spiralling off into space with a trail of mixed gases tapering away behind it, like a comet.

"What you have just witnessed was the creation of a seed-pod, whose job it is to infiltrate solar systems and seed planets that are without life. It was through a seed-pod such as this that your own Earth was seeded..."

I looked with awe at this apparently tiny, black doughnut spinning and twisting away from the galactic centre, on its way to create life on barren planets.

"... but that particular pod is to be your next port of call.

"However, before you go I have one more point to explain. For any creature, between its physical

body and its mental body there is another. Let's call it an emotional body. When you breathe in molecular oxygen and fix it into the haemoglobin in your blood, that particular energy bond that vibrated between, and linked, the two atoms in the molecule is not discarded, it forms, with similar bonds from nitrogen and carbon dioxide and water for example, an intermediate body, a fire body, that acts like a transformer stepping down the power from your intellectual body so that it may interact with the physical. It was this fire body of yours that was disrupted by the fire-jumping ritual on Earth and allowed your intellect to fly free. In order to release you from Nyarlathotep's body, I must now disrupt his fire body. Goodbye, Oliver. Good luck."

...and everything flamed up around me before fading down into blackness.

PART 3

Regrettably, at this point we must temporarily leave the first-hand account of Oliver Penner's experiences due to its lack of necessary detail, and adjust ourselves to a third party record of events.

The torus or doughnut shape which Oliver had seen being created by Azathoth in the Great Central

Ocean, to be sent spiralling off into space, was indeed his next port of call, but what happened to him there cannot be properly expressed in his own words, from his own pen, despite him being a Penner, because, at the time, so very much of what transpired was either badly understood or completely unknown to him.

We shall need to examine something in more detail before we can follow Oliver. While Azathoth was still pushing His tentacle out into the next, finer layer of liquefied gas, what had gathered as a detritus around its tip had actually been living beings, large compared to us, but like specks of dust to Azathoth. They were not unknown to us, being cigar shaped, made with a five-fold rotational symmetry. They were the old, the worn out and the damaged vacuum-based life forms that were willingly returning to their Creator as their productive, meaningful lives in deep space were coming to an end, like salmon returning to the places up-river of their birth to spawn and die. Falling into the central ocean, and gravitationally drawn down through the outer layers of liquefied gas, they would be overcome by the pressure and the tidal forces within the increasingly denser fluids until having all but succumbed came to rest at a very particular depth on the surface of a very particular liquid.

When one of Azathoth's tentacles would break through the surface at that level, these near dead were drawn to the sacred limb as if by a magnet. They jostled around the steadily enlarging tip, rolling on top of each other, jockeying for position,

as if each one wanted to position his/her head in blissful contact with the loving tentacle of Azathoth, Himself. They naturally formed a torus shape, with the best placed on the inside of this shape and the least well, perhaps the weakest or most damaged, on the outside away from the tentacle but still as near as they could manage to the sacred Being. As more and more of the tentacle emerged and the circular cross-section at this boundary of gases grew larger, more and more nearby creatures were drawn into the positional fray and the doughnut grew, until no further motion could be achieved and they were fitted and locked into a solid structure. If we were able to take a slice through part of this ring we would see that it had become completely circular, all the beings having their heads outwards with a central conjumblement of lower feelers meeting and locking together in the centre. This circle, of course, being swept round the other dimension to produce the torus.

Then, as Azathoth started to withdraw His sacred tentacle, this doughnut, no longer able to change shape, began to be drawn down into the deeper layers with it, contracting under the increasing pressure, locking tighter and tighter into its form and ending any life left in the creatures. Still, in death, each tenaciously held on, just as if it was trying desperately not ever to lose contact with the deity. But then the compressed doughnut could grip no longer, go no deeper, and was detached, flicked away and sped back up through the layers, all the way to the surface and beyond, where it spun off into the galaxy filled with and trailing streams of

evaporating gases from the various layers it had passed through behind it. This is what Greenwings had called a seed-pod.

Having been pressurised in the depths of the Central Ocean and battered by powerful energy fields emerging from the white-hole, the viable tissue of the wickedly squeezed, dead, vacuum-based creatures had been torn and squashed and was adhering in small, compressed packets to the sides of the cylindrical silica meshes that represent vacuum-based skeletons. Only the sets of five tough wings survived intact, folded away in their protective, longitudinal sheaths down the sides of the bodies. The tentacles, top and bottom, were reduced to ribbons, and the rings of five eyes, shrunken and dulled. The sacs of liquids and gases, deflated and frozen solid. However, down the centres of these hollow, cigar-shaped remnants of life still ran their five-fold central nervous systems. The sets of five toughened wires, now devoid of their interconnections and side links, that had once kept the enormous bodies functioning harmoniously as a whole, were now stretched taut like five gigantic, harp strings.

It is at this point that our story continues as the intellect of Oliver Penner was thrown, or perhaps we should give Greenwings the benefit of the doubt and say projected, into one of the dead vacuum-based creatures on the very outside of the torus-shaped seed-pod, where the weakest or most damaged specimens were to be found. His continued existence hung on a thread, five threads to be exact, as his total mentality was held by five

imperceptible tremors of its central nervous system. As the creature was dead, Oliver, of course, arrived in darkness and unconsciousness.

A darkness without dreams or any sense of the passing of time. It was many millennia that passed in this way, but to Oliver, no time at all. Then the seed-pod approached and entered a solar system and very slowly a change began to take place. The remains of the bodies of the creatures composing the torus began to thaw under the impact of the light and radiant heat from the system's sun. Gases began to fizzle and hiss from the remaining tissues. A circulation of mixed chemicals, some from the liquefied gases of the Central Ocean, some from the remnants of the creatures, first as a frothing, oozing liquid, then as hissing gas, began to flow within the doughnut, travelling around inside its ring as the heat warmed it from different sides as it spun towards, past and away from the luminary. The gases became denser the closer the torus approached the source of heat, until a wind began to blow within the form, a wind that ran frantically around the central hole, having no exit as a fine layer of silky substance had enveloped the doughnut on its way out of the Central Ocean. Gathering in strength, always in the same direction, the wind blew, producing vibrations in the thawing strings of the central nervous systems of all those creatures, which began to hum and howl like the strings of a thousand harps left out on the western cliffs in an Atlantic gale.

With the humming of his deceased vacuum-based creature's nervous system, Oliver regained

consciousness. His whole existence was now dependant upon the twanging of the harp strings of a dead alien. Not that he had eyes to see his predicament, but a sense of gravitational pull from the bulk of the seed-pod confided to him that he was at least standing erect. He took some time to accustom himself to the new set-up. Not that there was much to feel within the experience of this limited condition. He remembered Greenwings, just there in his immediate past, and correctly inferred and accepted that she had really transferred his intellect from the prepubescent Nyarlathotep to that very seed-pod they had watched being ejected by Azathoth.

He hadn't even said goodbye. He had never even talked to Nyarlathotep, only to Greenwings through him and he would have liked to have thanked him for hosting him for as long as he had. He tried to search around with his telepathy, hoping he could still contact them.

“Don't try to push in, you!” thought a belligerent voice at him, apparently very near at hand. “I'll damage you. I'll finish you. I'll squash you out of existence. You'll wish you'd never been born.”

Oliver had no doubt that this threat was meant for him. He was very upset and immediately, with fright, detuned himself from the vibrations of the alien harp strings and, consequently, lost consciousness. Eventually the seed-pod passed beyond the limits of the solar-system, the circulating gases cooled and re-solidified and the vibrations of the harp strings ceased. Once again all was silent and black in the seed-pod.

More millennia passed and the doughnut containing the intellect of Oliver Penner entered a new solar-system. The gases began to thaw and build pressure once again, and the harp strings that had once been the central nervous systems of vacuum-based life-forms began to sing. Oliver came back to himself as if only a night had passed since his last conscious thought.

"Better not try to project my thoughts," he thought.

"Who's that, thinking in my ear," said the belligerent voice. "Watch it! I'll finish you. You'll never get off this seed-pod, alive."

Oliver's only thought was of escape, but as he detuned himself rapidly to get back to the blackness, in the back of his mind he was wondering what exactly could have been implied by "get off this seed-pod."

Millennia climbed over millennia, and each time the torus-shaped seed-pod entered a new solar-system this one-sided conversation with assorted florid threats took place. However, gradually Oliver, by forcing his consciousness to speed up, was annealing himself against the threats, building within his psyche a backbone, a thing which he had never before possessed. Finally, after ten, or maybe twenty times round the loop of wake up – threat – darkness, Oliver answered back in his mind.

"Do it, then," he said, and everything turned black.

The next time a sun came near and the gases blew, Oliver woke up. The vibrating cords that

enabled his consciousness were slightly different, the sound they made just a little less strident in the cacophony of the entirety of the doughnut. His sense of balance was altered as well. He felt that he was leaning slightly to one side. Not that vacuum-based creatures have a side, or a front or back. However, he was definitely listing off the perpendicular. Oliver tried to reach out and sense more of the change but then a voice came to him, different to the belligerent voice he had become used to, a bit more constrained, a bit of a gangster.

“Stay where you are, or I'll erase your mother and all memory of her.”

Oliver detuned himself, instantly, and everything faded out.

As he regained consciousness, the seed-pod having entered another solar-system, Oliver was grappling with himself.

“I must speed up, I must overcome this.”

“Without that initial memory of your mother's love, you will be like an orphan, abandoned, alone in the universe, and very, very afraid, so don't hope for speed.”

Oliver cringed inside, and disappeared.

Another millennium passed. On awakening, Oliver only had one thought.

“Faster, I must be faster.”

“Already, you have lost your body image, and you didn't even notice,” said the voice.

Oliver thought about that. It was true he could no longer remember what it felt like to be in his own

body. While he was in Nyarlathotep's body, with its six limbs like a centaur, he had had a very clear knowledge of the differences, a very clear knowledge of his own, earthly body. Now, somehow, that was gone, he just couldn't get a grip on it.

"Do you remember someone threatening to squash you," asked the voice, "well, they did just that, but not your physical bodily form – your inner, mental one."

The light dawned upon Oliver. He had been robbed of his self-image. From his mental lexicon he drew out words – fingers, toes, arms, legs, but they were just words he had no corresponding "feel" to go with them, there was no sense of reality about them, they might as well have been tentacles or wings or scales. So, the threats were real, they had genuine effects upon him, and now losing all knowledge of his mother was looming. Oliver, abashed, detuned and vanished.

Many times Oliver awoke to that same point, to find the axe hovering above his mother, and withdrew. The millennia kept passing. He speeded up a little when he remembered that his actual mother had passed away countless thousands of years before, on a planet millions of miles away, after having lost her only child so mysteriously and that therefore it was only his internal representation of her that would be lost. However, and it was a big however, that was all he had left of her.

Finally, he manned-up and took the plunge.

"Do it, then," he spat, and was gone.

When the torus-shaped seed-pod entered yet another solar-system and the gases began to thaw and expand again and flow around, Oliver woke up. Things were different. He was definitely leaning more to the side, and felt lighter, less encumbered in his silica cell that held the vibrating cords that were his only mode of existence. He felt isolated and alone, like a leaf blowing in the wind, not however, knowing why that was or even why it should be any different. He remembered the Earth, a beautiful blue jewel, floating in the centre of Nyarlathotep's telescopic vision. There were millions upon millions of living creatures there. How could anyone feel isolated and alone, however far from home he happened to be, while holding that knowledge in mind?

“I will send a lethal virus to destroy all living things on this pathetic, little planet called 'Earth,' and expunge all memory of it from your mind.”

Oliver cringed as the now slightly more educated voice laid down the new threat. The blackness was forever waiting for him.

Sporadically, Oliver awoke, thinking of elephants or blue whales or lions and tigers and once even slugs - why not slugs? - they had a place in the scheme of things - but with just the memory of the threats he always sank back into oblivion.

Then one time he was thinking of dinosaurs. Tyrannosaurus Rex or triceratops or brontosaurus even the raptors, and had the realisation that all those creatures were long gone and yet their lives had made an impact somewhere in the fabric of the

universe. Oliver's mind was gearing up now, speeding, perhaps the Earth, or at least its inhabitants, had already ceased to be after the vast amount of time he had spent out in space. After all he had travelled all the way to the centre of the galaxy and was now on his way back out along one of the spiral arms. Perhaps he was the only inhabitant of Earth left alive in the universe. The rest of mankind and all that known life must have perished long ago. How could denying himself a chance to escape from this captivity have any effect on life on Earth? He even thought that, in the bodiless state he was now, it would perhaps be kinder on himself not to remember the Earth, where once he must have had a proper body that he could necessarily move at will. That Earth he had called home, he had safely put away in a drawer in his mind and taken it for granted.

"Do your worst," he threw into the void, and ceased.

At the next solar-system, Oliver felt things were very different. His angle to the perpendicular had yielded to an angle to the horizontal, which at that time was close to zero. He was lying almost on his side, almost completely flat to the centre of gravity, while his lower end, however, was still anchored solidly in the structure beneath him. This gave him some cause for speculation, because although he possessed no memory of having lived on a sphere where the direction of gravity always matches the direction of the perpendicular, even so, to have the direction of the centre of gravity to be at right angles to the perpendicular didn't make sense to

him.

Finally, he remembered the doughnut shaped seed-pod that Azathoth had ejected from the Central Ocean. That seed-pod was where Greenwings had sent his intellect, and in a flash of inspiration, he saw clearly in his mind what must have happened. When he first arrived on the seed-pod, he was stationed on the outside of the shape, where the centre of gravity of that body and the perpendicular were in alignment. Gradually, with each shift in position he had moved downwards towards the inner surface of the doughnut feeling that he was leaning more and more. He was now passing the half way point around the ring of the torus, sticking out sideways, and the centre of gravity, which must have been in the middle of the hole in the middle of the doughnut, was pulling at him from the side. He felt satisfied with this explanation and a little bit clever.

"If you think that such calculation will get you to the centre and off this seed-pod, you're mistaken," said the posh voice. "Unless you stay where you are, I will erase all memory of that limited education and pathetic excuse for a culture of yours and leave you no better off than a worthless guttersnipe."

Need we say it? Oliver shrank back, lost his attunement with the vibrating cords and faded out.

The next solar-system woke him up as usual. Now he was thinking. The voice had mentioned getting to the centre and leaving the seed-pod, but the next step would mean the loss of all his

reasoning power. His higher language, his logic and, most beloved of all, his mathematical skills would all be taken from him. He tried to weigh-up the pros and cons, but there weren't any. It was stark. In black and white. He could stay there in his vibrating cage, switching on and off with each passing star, proudly holding on to his 'abilities' as his now erased mother had called them, or, by letting go of his most precious attributes, could progress towards an unknown end that, quite possibly, could prove to be, without them, equivalently disastrous. He didn't want to let go of his skills, he had pride in them. The problem rattled round and round as overtones on his vibrating cords. There was no real choice, of course, but he just couldn't take the plunge and give it all up. Then something happened that hadn't happened before. While he was still thinking and arguing within himself, the seed-pod began to leave the solar-system, the gases cooled, the wind dropped and Oliver fainted away.

Then he was back. The choice was still there in front of him. He needed to speed up, to overcome his pride. In his short, not so exciting life on Earth, which he could no longer remember, he had cherished his education and his mother had lauded him for it. His schoolwork was a stable platform from which he could stand and face the hostile, extrovert world. This feeling of a solid support from learning had stayed firmly with him, although the establishment that had given it to him had perished long ago, along with the rest of the Earth. Having yet again taken too long, he lost

consciousness.

When he awoke a new speedier force was dominating his mind. Unknown deeper layers of his psychic being were rising up in anger against his dithering. He could have his learning without hope of life or life, and maybe hope, without learning. What use was it to him, anyway? Did he seriously intend to stay in this predicament for ever? Or until the seed-pod fell into a star? Or hit a planet or asteroid? Or left the galaxy all together and floated off into empty space where he would never wake up again? No! Of course not. The one and only possible route was onwards - into greater fear and uncertainty, yes, certainly - but onwards.

“Just do it,” he said, with uncharacteristic determination and venom, and disappeared.

When a new solar-system began its fly-by of the seed-pod, Oliver came to. At once he knew his position had changed. Not with the full analysis of angles and shapes that he had had before, but with enough attunement to know that his head end was now beginning to point slantingly downwards. He felt lighter in himself, although he couldn't possibly know why. In fact, his vibrational overtones, that harmonised with the basic vibrations of the five-stringed central nervous system of the vacuum-based life form in which he was resident at that time, were much faster and cleaner than they had been in the other life form when he had first arrived on the seed-pod. Much of the thinking and emotional baggage which tends to muddy the pure sinusoidal vibrations of a natural creature had been swept away.

“That's far enough,” said the judgemental voice. “If you try to go any further, I will take your very soul – your inner voice – the purpose of your existence.”

Oliver, of course, cringed and fled back into darkness.

Later he awoke. Not having been brought up with a religious background, not that he remembered whether he had or not, Oliver wasn't too impressed with the latest threat. He didn't even quite know what a soul was, at least, not from looking within himself, anyway, and as for a purpose for existence...

“I have taken your body image that supported you. I have taken your mother, the memory of whose love, supported you. I have taken your planet whose genetic diversity supported you. I have taken your education that buoyed you up in adversity and supported you. Now you must lose your soul, your most divine part, the transcendental 'you.'”

Oliver tried to answer the voice.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“I am your death, your total annihilation and I will have all of you,” replied the voice. “But right now, I want your eternal soul.”

Before the voice had quite finished uttering, Oliver was gone back into his blackness.

Oliver came and went many times. No longer able to reason things out, he was just afraid - like a hunted animal, exhausted, dispirited and cornered.

He simply slid back into the blackness before the voice could begin. He was scared of the voice like a feral cat, that has gone astray and will not respond to the call of its owner any more.

Inside him, however, an anger was building, the reaction to so much fear and intimidation. A rage which had only one target, the voice. Finally, he turned, metaphorically of course, and confronted the voice.

“Then come and get it,” he spat with utter vehemence, and was gone.

Yet another solar-system, yet another melting of frozen gases into a circulating wind and yet another humming of the various central nervous systems that had collectively been Oliver's home for uncountable millennia, brought Oliver back into consciousness. He was almost standing on his head. Hanging from what would have been his feet from the inner edge of the doughnut, but not exactly vertical... not yet.

He felt empty inside. Lost, abandoned, marooned. He had no purpose any more, no future. Just the instinct of self-preservation which is built into all creatures. He listened for the voice, knowing there was nothing left inside him to threaten, all was gone. All had been stolen from him, whatever it was. He was quiescent. Then the voice spoke.

“In your innermost heart you keep a secret. So secret that you have hidden it even from yourself. In order to go any further you must yield up that secret, bring it out into the light... to be judged and

executed."

Oliver was stricken dumb. A guilty fear of imminent discovery gripped him, interfering with the resonance of the cords that gave him his existence, and oblivion beckoned.

As he regained consciousness, all his efforts were to hide. To create so small an overtone on the humming of the strings that the voice would not know he was there. Of course, it didn't work – where else would he be? - where else could he be? So the voice continued.

"You have something so precious that when you obtained it, you put it directly into the centre of your heart. You haven't taken it out to look at it, you haven't savoured it, like a miser savours his heap of coins, you didn't drool over it like an abuser drools over his intended victim..."

Oliver felt uncomfortable with the analogies he couldn't quite understand and squirmed within his frequencies. "What could it possibly be?" he wondered to himself.

"Danse!"

Oliver was stricken dumb, again. An icicle had been thrust through his heart – not the physical one, of course, that was long gone. He had been pinned to a board like a butterfly with an ice-cold pin straight through his core, and a spotlight had been turned upon him, glaring unforgivingly, exposing his deepest treasure, his innermost love. He was forced to face that it was true. "Danse" had come to mean everything to him. In their short encounter, the socially and romantically immature and inept

Oliver had fallen completely in love with Danse MacAbré, Sir Charles' daughter, and had positioned her portrait, alone, on the altarpiece of his heart.

No! No! Not that. He couldn't yield up that which encompassed, as a mantra, his everything. He couldn't yield up Danse for sacrifice on that bloody altar of the voice. His overtones faded from the humming of the cords and all went black.

It took many passes of the seed-pod before Oliver's foreshortened intellect accepted that the real, living Danse MacAbré had perished long, long ago, and without him. He had been the merest flicker in her life. Surely, not anything memorable. If he had had eyes, he would have sobbed copious, bitter tears. As it was, that which had sustained him and had given him a strength and a poise beyond his natural ken dissolved into ash. He was a broken man-child, beyond retrieve. All had perished.

In the end he had to speak. He had to drag himself free from the agony of the constantly repeated approaching loss of his own dear Danse. Not the actual Danse of the outside world, but his own inner Danse, that fountain-of-life from whose waters he drank and bathed. He needed closure. He needed a full stop to be added to the short, tragic saga of his life, that had lasted so many millions of years. So he spoke, quietly.

“Then do it. Let it be an end.”

And, ever so sadly, the lonely, wounded and broken boy disappeared.

When he awoke, with the next transit of a sun, because he did awaken again, he was hanging

completely upside down from his lower end, which was still attached to the doughnut.

"I feel like a bat in a cave," he thought to himself, "hanging here by my feet."

He remembered the documentary he had seen with rows and rows of bats hanging from the ceiling of a cave, and how his mother laughed at him when he wouldn't watch a film with vampires in it because it was "too scary." Perhaps he had been a bit oversensitive.

"But that bat cave was a bit like this seed-pod," he thought.

The image came to him of hundreds of empty cigar shapes standing on end, all over and around in a doughnut shape with one ring of them on the inside pointing to the centre of equilibrium within the hole in the middle. Gases, liberated by the warming up of the pod by the proximity of a sun, periodically whistling around the cigars, as the gases trapped in by some unknown force circled through it. This was his case, he was sure, he had started standing on the outside and was now vibrating in one of the cigars that pointed straight towards the empty centre of the doughnut.

Then he realised... He was hanging by his feet - he had his body-image back. He remembered his mother laughing at him - he had her memory back. He remembered the bats hanging in their cave - he had his memories of Earth back. He was working out his various positions on the torus - he had his education back. He felt a returning sense of direction in his life that could perhaps lead off this

seed-pod - he had his soul back. Did he dare look? Could he bear to be wrong? He looked inside himself and found the comfort and embrace of his precious memories of the short time he had spent with Danse MacAbré. He was complete again. Yet not the same. A force, a new strength of character had been forged by his ordeal on the seed-pod. He had been stripped down to his very core and had been forced to see what is true and real to him in this world, and now being reassembled he had emerged with a different outlook on life, a new positive outlook. With this new energy Oliver could extend his influence beyond the cords that had sustained his intellect thus far and enter into the pockets of remaining vacuum-based tissue.

"YES!" He shouted it out with joy in his mind and those cords sustaining his existence twitched and vibrated violently under the new force and urgency, and the pockets of remaining tissue wobbled and squelched in unison with such motion that his whole cigar-shaped framework shook with it.

"Crack!" Like a gunshot in the wind, came the sound of his remnant of a vacuum-based creature breaking away from the seed-pod. Once loose, it slowly fell down towards the centre of gravity which was exactly in the middle of the hole in the doughnut. Luckily, if luck can be considered to be a genuine concept in life, mixing with the gases he carried with him, there were gases there held by the gravity of the doughnut and in steady flux from the spinning of it. So still the cords kept vibrating allowing Oliver to exist within their overtones.

Slowly, after turning this way and that and moving to and fro about the centre of gravity, any motion of the cigar-shaped framework slowed to a stop. It was held by the gravity of the doughnut exactly in the centre of the hole, lying longitudinally in the hole with the “head” end facing the sun of the solar-system that the seed-pod was traversing at that time. Oliver was oblivious to this fact, because he had been in total darkness for the entire duration of his stay in the seed-pod. Just how many millions of years must have passed since he had watched Azathoth creating this pod from the dying bodies of the burnt-out relatives of Greenwings and Nyarlathotep with the recycled matter and energy from the white-hole that poured into the galactic core?

So, Oliver hung there in the centre of the hole in the doughnut, not knowing what to do next. His newly discovered force and strength of character that would lead him out of his predicament were rapidly seeping away. He could, however, feel a slight pull upwards, towards the sun, but he didn't know the why of it then, and his “head” felt a bit warm, which was strange. Other than that he was stuck, lacking even “the voice” with which to contend.

However as he hung there, in the copious flow of spiralling gases that whistled around and through the silica mesh that was the skeletal framework of the creature he was inhabiting, the various remnant tissues thawed out further. Tissues, that were not randomly left over from the death of the vacuum-based life-form in the depths of the great central

ocean as may have been previously thought, but very specific tissues that began to function in a limited but preprogrammed way.

Oliver began to feel through his new body as parts of it woke up from a frozen sleep of countless millennia. This was a literal “skeleton crew” of cells that was left in the “vessel” of the deceased body. He worked mentally to try to map his body-image to the five-fold rotational body he found himself in. Then, to his enormous surprise, his eyes opened and he saw. Light entered the cave he had inhabited for so long, and he saw the light, and the light was good for Oliver. The five eyes at the top of the creature had thawed out and begun to function. Blurred though the vision was, it came as a salvation to the tried and tested sensibilities of reborn Oliver. He clung to it as the light at the end of a very long tunnel. He bathed in it and revelled in it.

As he watched the precious few elements of the picture from those five eyes come into focus and position, he saw a vast panorama, far beyond the visual field of our eyes, or even Nyarlathotep's eyes which were only stereoscopic as he was still young and air-based and only had two eyes. Directly above him, in super-meta-visual glory, was the sun that the seed-pod was traversing. He saw it with all fifteen colours and ultra-violet and infra-red and other nameless wave-lengths beyond as a scintillating golden ball, sending out glinting sparks across the whole extended range of hues and into his eyes. He watched in awe. The sparks of fire were alive, they were calling to him, beckoning to

him, like sirens in an ancient sea.

Around him, for these eyes had an almost total 360 degree range of vision, he could see shining in the sunlight the pod he had so recently come from. Amazingly, it was exactly as he had imagined it. A huge doughnut shape composed of rings and rings of remnant cigars. What he had not realised was that on its exit from one of the layers of the central ocean it had picked up a thin film which overlayed everything and gave it the appearance of being draped in the finest glistening gossamer which stretched and billowed, like the sails of a sailing ship, under the pressure of the circulating gases inside it. Looking for the place where he had so recently been, Oliver saw that many empty spaces existed and correctly surmised that one creature had detached at each solar pass. However, alone as he was at the centre, he could not begin to conjecture how the others had escaped from this gravitational trap. It was a real mystery.

Meanwhile his own pool of gases twisting and turning around the centre of gravity at the centre of the hole of the doughnut, kept him slowly rotating around his long axis but no more. Satiated with the stupendous view around him, he began to seriously wonder what should happen next but the answer appeared to be – nothing. Eventually, they would leave the vicinity of the beckoning sun, the gases would cool and settle and Oliver would, as so often had happened, necessarily fall asleep.

However, his alien body had other ideas. He started to feel a need to stretch his long-unused limbs. When he did, the five wings folded down his

sides responded slightly. He experimented. Using an image of raising both his arms while visualising one of the wings, caused all five to move slightly outwards. He tried again and achieved a greater effect. He knew from Greenwings that at full stretch these wings were very large, far too large to be opened in the hole of the doughnut, but by keeping them semi-folded he was able to extend just the first portion of them as a bat may do when flapping on the ceiling of its cave. Then a strange thing happened. He moved off the centre of gravity, outwards, away from the sun to a point level with the back edge of the seed-pod. When he retracted his wings, he returned to the centre.

Oliver pondered as he tried the trick again. It produced the same result. Even so, whether at the centre of gravity or just off the centre of gravity, could there be any point to it all? And with that question came the answer and Oliver understood.

In a flash he had seen it all. Azathoth's plan that sent these seed-pods off into space – and what exactly they were required to do there.

He tried to use his new-found eyes to search for a planet orbiting this sun. Finally he spotted one. It was nice, and a pretty blue and white, a bit like the Earth had been. He tried to magnify the image of it, but wasn't too successful. Yet this dead, alien body knew, he could feel its knowledge like an itch, that that was the one. He had to aim for that one.

So he opened his wings and moved through the central hole of the doughnut to the other position away from the sun. Then he folded his wings as

quickly as he could and started to move back to the centre with a little overshoot, and opened his wings again, and was pushed back out with a little more overshoot and folded them again and returned and opened them again. With each pass, Oliver became more proficient at it, and with each pass the overshoot became larger and his velocity increased. Until, like a child on a swing, he had achieved a to-and-fro motion, through the hole in the doughnut, that was steadily increasing in velocity and distance.

The itch in his wings told him when he had created enough speed. It felt a bit like tiredness, but he would have kept on doing it forever if it had been necessary. So then, he kept his wings folded as he shot through inwards in the cycle and, having achieved the relatively slight speed required as escape velocity for the seed-pod, was released into the solar-system as a free agent. Unfurling his wings to their fullest extent, after some experimentation, and setting them to tack in on a spiral towards the sun and the inner planets as he had seen Greenwings do when approaching the Central Ocean, he could finally think about what was happening.

The first thing to consider was simply how he could still be conscious when he had left most of the pool of gases behind him in the hole in the seed-pod. The answer seemed to be that now the vacuum-based body was fully thawed out and back out in free space a limited level of life had switched on in the creature. He could feel the various areas of plant and animal uni-cellular life still clinging to the skeletal framework communicating through the

remnant central nervous system. It was a mere "zombie" of a fully functioning Greenwings but those limited nervous impulses were more than enough to carry Oliver's intellect.

His next consideration was of Azathoth's grand plan. As he saw it, the plan was simple in idea, if not so simple in practice. Oliver had to marvel at Azathoth's accuracy in the projection of seed-pods millions of miles into interstellar space. Approaching a sterile planet with no life, the remnant of a creature would enter the atmosphere and crash down onto the surface releasing the cells of its plant and animal tissue into the environment, where they could mutate and flourish and evolve to suit the conditions found there to form the basis of a colony of alien life. The complex vacuum-based genes would be simplified by regression back to water-based or air-based types and conquest by its fauna and flora of the sea and land would begin at a cellular level. Something like amoebae and blue-green algae would spread to cover the entire developing surface, oxygenating and taming, mutating and evolving to higher forms to create a living biosphere.

Why did this happen? Through the echoes in the remnant of his zombie body Oliver was given a pointer. Each vacuum-based creature and each living planet was a neuron, a nerve cell in the complete neural network of the galaxy. Reigned over by Azathoth, this galactic "brain" was able to keep all parts of the galaxy running harmoniously, directing movements and evolutions as necessary. However, this brain's higher purpose as itself a cell

in the totality of the Universe was beyond Oliver's understanding. The concepts were too abstract, too convoluted for him to grasp, like a baby trying to read ancient hieroglyphics.

Coming out of his reverie on the purpose of the galaxy in the life of the universe, Oliver had to face his own mortality. When the zombie Greenwings entered the atmosphere of the planet, it would break up and spread its cells through the atmosphere, to come down to the surface, either on land or at sea, to seed the planet with life. What would happen to him? There would be no remnant of a central nervous system to sustain his intellect. He would, necessarily, be lost. Not that he could complain. Having lost his own body millions of years ago, way back on Earth, he had been supported first by Greenwings in her son's, Nyarlathotep's, body and then in a string of vacuum-based remnants in the seed-pod where she had sent him. Only now was this strange extension of life coming to an end, in the destructive forces encountered while entering the atmosphere of this new blue planet. The creature that had adopted him to be his final body would be literally ripped out from under him.

And so it happened. Holding in mind an image of his beloved Danse, he approached the alien Earth-like planet that revolved around an alien Sun-like star and began his descent. The huge green wings were buffeted by the upper atmosphere as they billowed and stretched in an attempt to reduce the speed. Pieces began to fly off them and Oliver could feel the pain of it, like a heat burning at him. The tough animal tissues were being shredded by

the searing force of the atmosphere and flying away. The cords he had relied on to exist began to fray and snap. The heat from below was overcoming him...

...and Oliver fell and rolled over on the cool, damp, October grass.

“Ooooh... Well done!” said Danse, as she bounced up and down, clapping her hands.

EPILOGUE

As I rolled over on the deliciously cool grass, and heard Danse's whoop of approval of my leap over the fire, all the long-yearned-for links had dropped themselves back into place. It wasn't as if I was waking from a dream, those memories of deep space didn't disperse. In fact, they will never be forgotten, they are etched indelibly into my mind. However, my reactions appeared to be infinitely more flexible and immediately enabled me to conceive a plan of action.

As I stood up and brushed myself off, Sir Charles, Comtesse Belladonna and Dieter approached and surrounded me. I could see how, once, I would have shaken with fear before their apparent composure. Their meaningful expressions and their auras of menace would have belittled me. But after literally passing through the fire, however, I was a

changed man. A man - no longer a boy. To me, now, they only radiated desperation containing a plea for tolerance, acceptance and help.

"Did anything take place?" asked Sir Charles, looking a bit disappointed that it was still just me - that not even one of his Old Gods had managed to materialise.

Then I spoke, noting the new timbre and authority in my voice. Turning the tables on that unholy trinity as they looked down at their feet and shuffled sheepishly.

"I have met and communed with Nyarlathotep and other representatives from the Old Ones, and travelled with them to the centre of the galaxy where I had an audience with Azathoth on his emerald throne, the blind, idiot god who commands from the white-hole in the centre of the Central Ocean." This was news to them, slipped in deliberately as a concrete proof that I was speaking truthfully. "He has sent me back to you with a message."

I adjusted my posture meaningfully, as one does to adequately represent a Demiurge.

"'Master Sir Charles MacAbré, High Priestess the Comtesse Belladonna Ruskow and Guardian Dieter Düsseldorf, you have done well in your efforts to arrange contact with Us. It is time now, however, for you three to take a step backwards and let the younger generation take over the undertaking and equivalently fulfil their mission. My Envoy, Mister Oliver Penner has been well instructed in the next phase. We are confident that he is fully capable of

carrying it through to Our satisfaction. You may each rest content in the successful accomplishment of your life's work.'"

The three looked properly exalted, while still obsequious and subservient. However, most of all, they looked hugely relieved. A great weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

I approached Danse, who had shyly kept out of the big talk.

"To continue with Azathoth's Great Work, therefore," I addressed to Sir Charles, "I must now ask for your daughter's hand in marriage..." and turning to Danse, "...if you'll have me, that is?"

"Ooooh, yes, rather... I do," said Danse, holding my arm, looking innocently up into my face with those beautiful Earth-like eyes.

"But of course you'll have my consent, my boy," said Sir Charles, with a look of genuine pleasure.

There was a formal engagement, and I became Sir Charles' estate manager. We married after we had both turned eighteen with all the necessary pomp, and my mother in tears throughout, and took up residence at the lodge, together at last as Oliver and Danse Penner.

We now have two children, Charles named after his grandfather and Sophia named after the Comtesse Belladonna, whose real name is Sophia. They both dote on them, as does Dieter who loves to trot them around on his back like a horse.

When I see Danse caring for them with a mother's love, I remember Greenwings bringing up

Nyarlathotep, and think that perhaps we are no so very different from those beings of the vacuum.

Sometimes I catch one of the children concentrating on some invisible spot in the air as if listening. I don't intrude. If needed, it will come to light. I suppose, its all part of their inheritance, a part of Azathoth's master plan.

LIFE THREE

ST TOM

PART 1

Managing to wriggle out of the education system at seventeen with a small, mixed bag of qualifications leaning towards the sciences, I was pushed by the Careers Office into trying my luck in industry. This I did, as varying types of technical

assistant, but was, after a few changes of post, thoroughly disillusioned. The interesting part was always in the learning of the job, after that it quickly settled down to the same boring routine - days ad nauseam. Consequently, I drifted into lesser roles like accounts clerk, stock-taker and the like until I ended up approaching thirty and quitting after ten weeks as a washer-downer in a dusty pill factory.

Through some voluntary work with the Red Cross, while I lived on the savings I had previously managed to earn, I found myself, from approaching necessity, fitting-in as a carer in an old people's home. Although the work was periodically heavy, usually dirty and always emotionally taxing, and, although my people skills are far from perfect, I found more satisfaction in such hands-on menial work. It gave me a sense of having done something worthwhile with my life by the end of a shift. At times it could be harrowing on the nerves having to deal face-to-face with dementia and death, but "somebody has to do it" as they say. It was there that I became acquainted with George.

George came from another, more real world to me. He was a mild tempered, very private person. He needed only slightly tepid bath water because of the length of time he had spent on destroyers up near the Arctic Circle during the Second World War – his body thermostat had been reset by the constant exposure to the intense cold and couldn't bear the heat of anything like a normal bath. He had been the operator of some secret type of wireless communications equipment. He wore a masonic

ring, some of their paraphernalia was stacked in the back of his wardrobe and a couple of their books were on his shelf. That was the sum total of what I ever knew of his own past.

For some time he had been slowly declining. He was quite a bit overweight and the strain was beginning to tax his heart. One day, as I was passing his room - he always kept the door open - he called to me.

"Listen," he said, "there's one thing in life I have learnt, and before I go, I would like to pass it on to one other person. Do you believe in God?"

"Ooops!" I thought, "he's caught religion."

"Not the church type, necessarily," he added, seeing my face.

"I was christened, but not brought up within any of that," I replied.

"Well listen... All this Old Testament, Virgin Birth in Bethlehem and such like were only put there to try to convert the Jews of the time to Christianity, make them believe that Christ was their Messiah. Now after two thousand years, those that were going to believe, have converted and those that weren't, haven't and probably won't ever. So let's throw all that confusion away and get down to the real facts.

"God is a Trinity. That is, He has three ways of appearing to us, three persons as they say. First, is the Father, the Creator, what they usually call God. When they say God is love, they understate it. What they should say is that God is equivalent to love, in a mathematical sense. You know that

equivalence is represented by an equals sign with three parallel lines?"

"Yes," I replied, shuffling my feet.

"It means that wherever you would use the word love, you can use the word God and vice versa. God, the Father that is. So when you see a mother and baby looking at each other, each full of love for the other, you are, in fact, looking at God. God is there, shining in their eyes, looking out. This is the first and finest of proofs of the existence of God, and undeniable. It should be kept as the corner stone of your faith. The same can be seen between young lovers, or couples who have grown old together, or a beloved pet and its master. God is there in their eyes, looking out at their beloved and out into the world. Not that it can't be imitated or feigned, of course, but that doesn't alter the truth of the idea.

"The second person, the Son, is different. Christ is the life within all creatures, within the heart, that which truly lives and suffers, and as Buddha says – all life is suffering.

"Finally, the Holy Spirit is the Light in us, the light of the mind - thought. Not the counting, calculating logic that a machine could imitate, but the original thought of human reason. The Muses of ancient Greece were forms of the Holy Spirit.

"Together these three persons or facets of God, as the Trinity, represent the totality of the Love, Life and Light in the world. In the sciences they are Space, Time and Mind, respectively.

"And that is the end of my lecture. Thank you for

listening."

The next shift he called to me again. "I told you about God, let me quickly explain about the devil. The devil isn't anyone really, it's just the logical negation thrown up by our minds. If we say, 'I want to be good,' the devil automatically whispers temptingly in our ear, 'but what if you were bad?' Rather than the transcendent thinking inspired by the Holy Spirit, the devil confines us to counting our pennies and mundane logic. Not that these are not necessary in their place in the world but they should not be on top or lead us or replace the inspiration of the true thought of the Spirit. One strand of this negativity woven into the weave of our thinking will invalidate the whole. Hence, we cannot swim both with Mammon and with God. Anyway, just remember that seeing God shining in somebody's eyes is what makes life worth living. That is the meaning of seeing the true, living God."

I mention these matters not because they enter into what follows, but just to illustrate the man, George. Days later as I was passing his door, he called to me from his bed. "Do you know," he began, "when I was away on the boats, my wife, who was Greek, by the way, used to talk to the ancient Greek philosophers. Being alone in the house, during the day, she would describe what she was doing, cooking, washing, knitting or whatever to the ancients. Only, to describe such things in detail, she would need to explain our modern world and the machines and utensils we have. Only, to describe them, she would need to tell them of our knowledge of physics and chemistry and metallurgy

and biology and psychology and geography and astronomy. In one afternoon she would send back to them the whole baccalaureate.

"'Why not,' she would say. 'We know that the Chinese talk to their ancestors. Who is to say that they are talking to them now, when they are dead, and not then, in the past, when they were still alive. Perhaps that is why China has remained such a unified country through so many centuries. Maybe this back-flow of knowledge into the past is happening all the time, causing small shifts in the direction of the future of the world. How many people are telling things, right now, to Leonardo Da Vinci, Nostrodamus or Albert Einstein?

"'After all, what do we think a prophet really <u>is</u>? From where does his information come – if not from the times he describes? It makes you wonder, who is up there, in our future, talking back to us? Come to that, where do our inspirations in answer to our problems originate? From our own deeper thoughts? From some other mind in the now? Or, perhaps, from the past thinking of another, or even the future where such solutions are commonplace?'"

Another day, near the end, he called to me again.

Have you seen this in the paper?" he asked. "They have discovered yet another sub-atomic particle." Being on my break at the time, I stopped and let him give me his ideas on quantum physics. "They have too many of those," he began, "it seems to me we only need two. When two waves of energy meet head on, they create an electron and positron pair. As the cosmic forces in our part of

the universe are what they are, it is the positron which takes on more energy by a rotation off centre and as Einstein pointed out, increased energy equals increased mass. So the positron spins and rotates with more and more energy until it weighs a thousand times more than the electron and we call it a proton. Together they make a hydrogen atom. If the electron now takes enough energy to enter an unknown-to-science tight orbit around the proton we call that collapsed hydrogen atom a neutron. I think all the other "particles" they find are just these two initial forms with opposite charge carrying varying degrees of energy as mass. The tight electron, forming a torus or doughnut shape can now 'glue' two protons together and we have a deuterium ion. Further, two tight electrons can hold four protons in a tetrahedron while the other two stay in wider orbits, and we have helium. The rest of the Periodic Table follows."

The next day George called to me again.

"You're a bright lad," he said. "My daughter will soon be coming down south to clear out my things after I am gone. But there is one thing I would rather she didn't take back with her. It's in the bottom of my wardrobe in a wooden case. I would be much happier if you took it. Don't ask me any questions about it, though. Just take it, now, before I slip away."

When I tried to say something positive about his health he replied that the only certainty we ever have, in life, is our death. So, with thanks, I took the case. When I got it home I looked inside, to see some old-fashioned vacuum tubes and strips of

brass, connectors and wires. I pushed it under the bed. Soon George passed away as expected, which was saddening, although I wasn't on shift at the time and I soon forgot all about George and his wooden box.

Life moved on and I needed to change flat. Flat is perhaps over-stating it, but the new bedsit had its own tiny, separate kitchen and even tinier shower-room, so I thought of it as a flat. Clearing out a few unnecessaries before the move, I came, again, across George's case. So I opened it. The wooden lid came right off, like a sewing machine lid, revealing a mass of valves like an old radio. I remembered that George had been a wireless operator and assumed it was something of the sort. It had the smell I remembered from childhood of old gramophones. As I uncoiled the flex that was attached, complete with an out-of-date or foreign two-pin plug, I could see that it was divided into two halves built up on a polished mahogany board. One half was a panel of valves, resistors and capacitors properly plugged into sockets on a raised sheet-metal baseplate, all wildly out-of-date and probably not replaceable, with their connectors and wiring tucked neatly underneath the plate. The other half was dominated by a glass case or lid. Under it were a pair of stout, brass terminals, which, coming in from the sides, were bent up vertically and then forward horizontally, to face each other about nine inches apart and about three inches off the mahogany base.

So to visualise this: the base was a bit larger than eighteen inches by twelve. But it should be viewed

from one end, the end with the valves or vacuum tubes should be away from you. Directly in front, you see a push-button connected to its terminals on the left side and a brass tube with a small tap like a spigot on the right. Next, under glass, the two bent electrodes, shiny brass about a quarter of an inch thick, staring at each other like the heads of two quarrelling snakes. They are securely dug into the wood and screwed down by brass plates on the board. Behind them and outside the back of the glass dome are three pairs of empty brass terminals, with knurled thumb nuts, in a row. Behind them is one other solitary pair of terminals before we reach the raised plate of the electrical valves. Wires run from the switch, the two electrodes and all four pairs of terminals through grooves cut neatly into the board stretching under the valve plate. Clearly what ever happened, happened between the two snake-like electrodes, because on top of the two electrodes was the thick glass dome, which was sunk into the wood in a greased channel. This oblong dome of blown glass had a small handle on top and I was able to lift it and replace it into its channel, which was cut very accurately into the wood to take it. The small brass tube with the spigot passed under the glass and opened just inside the dome. I had no idea what such a device could have been used for in its day and carefully clipped the well-made wooden lid back over it all.

Then I moved flat, and while I was unpacking and stowing things away, I came upon George's device once again. This time I left it out on the side until I had time to inspect it properly. This spare

time came one lazy Saturday afternoon, when the case again caught my eye.

I took down the box, opened it and began to inspect the contents. As I uncoiled the flex with the strange plug, I decided to replace it with a new one. If something went pop, I wouldn't count myself any the worse for it. So, with a new plug wired on and in place, I switched it on at the socket. The valves glowed pale blue and hummed a bit, but nothing happened. I tried clicking the push-button switch on the front – nothing. I took off the glass dome and with a faint click, the valves went out. I put the dome back on and with a faint click the valves came back on. Just in case I was breaking a contact somewhere by being too rough with it, I checked that the whole machine was flat on the table and very gently lifted the dome. There was a faint click and the valves went out. So, I had to conclude there was a safety switch built into the groove under the glass rim that turned the thing off if the lid was removed, so that it wouldn't work without the glass in place. I had better add that the glass of the dome was thick, like Pyrex, and it weighed heavily between finger and thumb when lifting it.

The existence of a safety switch raised the device into a new category of machine in my mind. It wasn't just a nonsense thing. I had suspected such from the care that had gone into the making of it from mahogany and brass, but now I was sure. I unplugged it and examined it more closely. Between the switch and the tube with the tap, on the front edge, there was, I discovered, also a small drawer neatly cut into the base that I had

overlooked. Inside the drawer were two things. One was a four inch brass wheel with wires coming off it, the other was a folded sheet of paper. When I opened out the paper, it had two pencilled drawings on it, side by side. One sketch showing a small candle alight under the dome with a stopwatch drawn near it, while the other was the same, but the brass wheel was connected into the circuit in place of the push-button switch. Between the two drawings had been roughly pencilled-in a large question mark. Now, this was a find-and-a-half. Here, drawn on paper by hand, was clearly an experiment which had yielded confusing results for the previous owner, whether that was George or not.

What I did, of course, being at a loose end that day, was to set up a reproduction of the experiment for myself. With the machine plugged in, I put a small, lit tea-light under the dome and watched. After some time the candle dwindled and went out, having burnt up all the oxygen under the glass dome. Surprisingly the dome couldn't be lifted, a partial vacuum was created in the dome apparently by the burning up of the oxygen. I could have expected that the carbon dioxide and water vapour residue would have compensated for the loss of oxygen, however, when I turned the little tap on the brass tube to the open position there was a faint hiss of gas entering and then the lid came off. Then I connected up the brass wheel to the nuts instead of the push-button. The wheel had many spokes of brass and a small brass bush on a side arm which made contact with them in turn as the wheel rotated. In the centre of the wheel was a little handle which

could be used to turn it. One wire came from the centre of the wheel the other from the brass bush touching the spokes. It was clearly a hand-made, repeating on/off switch. As the wheel rotated, contact was made and broken between spoke and bush, five, ten or even twenty times per second depending on the speed the wheel was turned. So, I relit the candle, closed the glass lid and started turning the little handle. After a while the candle went out as before. It seemed to have been a shorter time but that was probably because I was concentrating on carefully turning the wheel at a nice speed, or so I thought.

Deciding that that could hardly be called an experiment, I took my alarm clock, the only thing I had at that time with a sweep second hand and repeated the first test. I did not detach the wheel, I just didn't turn it. The candle lasted for one minute and fifty-four seconds. Then I repeated the second, placing the domed lid down as the second hand was at the top of its cycle. I started turning the wheel smoothly and was surprised when the candle extinguished before one minute was up. I tried the second part again, this time turning the wheel a bit faster. After just over thirty seconds, the candle wilted and went out. The record of these things I put down on a scrap of paper that became the beginnings of my notes on a string of experiments.

Not convinced, I tried again. 2 mins 2 secs without turning the wheel, but only 47 secs when I turned the wheel. And then the answer sprang into my head. There must be a spark between the two big snake electrodes each time a spoke of the wheel

makes contact and the sparks are burning off the oxygen - so that there is less for the candle and so the candle goes out more quickly. By this time it was dark outside, so, with curtains drawn, I turned off the lights and repeated the second part in the dark. The valves gave an eerie blue light, but I covered them with a piece from a cardboard box to allow me to see the sparks. There weren't any. Not from the angle I had while I was turning the wheel, anyway.

Then a simple improvement struck me. Using a small battery-driven electric motor and gearing system from a toy building set I had never felt able to throw away, I was able to rig up the motor to turn the wheel at a steady rate. This freed me then to be able to view the electrodes properly, even with a magnifying glass, to see what was happening. What I saw was no spark. I put my ear against the glass of the dome, but there was no crackling sound of sparks. However, with the magnifying glass, I could see that something was affecting the top of the candle flame. Because the candle was placed on the base-board at the obvious point between the heads of the two snake-like electrodes - there really wasn't anywhere else - the very tip of the tea-light flame was at a level with their tips. As the wheel turned, something strange happened to the tip of the flame. It didn't flame up like it did when the wheel was stationary, instead it appeared to swallow itself, to turn inwards and disappear. This statement, is perhaps using later knowledge, and might just over-emphasise slightly the sight which was, at the time, very difficult to image clearly. Something was

definitely odd about the tip of that flame though.

Then the flame went out. Giving up trying to imagine what had been happening to the flame, I sat back and saw that some greasy soot had built up on the inside of the top of the glass dome and could have been affecting my view of the events. After letting in the air, I took it off and cleaned it, carefully.

It was time, I thought, for some real scientific experimentation, to switch on my supposed science background. I ran off ten tests without turning the wheel, with a result of an average time of 1 min 54 secs, within a range of 1 mins 38 secs to 2 mins 8 secs. After that I cleaned the three inch spot of soot off the inside of the glass lid. Then I ran ten tests using the wheel with the electric motor attached, with a resulting average of 1 min 8 secs and a range from 59 secs to 1 min 16 secs. There was no doubt from comparing these times, that George's device had had a very significant effect on the life-time of the candle flame. As the set-up didn't appear to create sparks, it seemed that some extra oxygen-eating force was being applied to the flame. Absent mindedly, I removed the cover to clean the soot. Almost too late, I noticed that the soot now lay, not in a spot as before but in a four inch ring with a two inch hole in the centre. So here was some objective proof that something had actually disturbed the burning of the candle flame when the wheel was used.

That was all for the first day. I was getting over-excited. I held on to my objective proofs of candle burn time and soot pattern but was too scattered in

my thinking to continue, so packed it all up and went to bed. The next day I was busy with other things and it was late before I could settle down to continue investigating this phenomenon. It seemed reasonable to put a support under the tea-light to lift the flame up to the level of the electrodes so that the centre of the flame would be in the line where just the tip had been before. Surely then some effect, if there were any, would be more clearly visible. As a trial run, I elevated the candle on a small piece of wood, about the size and shape of a matchbox, covered it with the glass dome, switched on and timed it. It went out in two minutes exactly, well within the times of the previous tests and showing that the reduced volume of air caused by the addition of the extra small piece of wood didn't seriously affect the overall result. So elevating the candle, with the slight reduction in air volume that that entailed, didn't change anything. Then I repeated the test with the wheel in place. As soon as the wheel was switched on, the candle started to gutter strangely as if the flame was being attacked by a gust of wind. I stopped the wheel and the flame recovered. On with the wheel again and the flame stuttered, quite like they do when the pool of wax is about to drown the wick.

I was quite tired from the day I had had, and not able to appreciate what exactly was happening. So I started again, to be able to get a timed run with the elevated tea-light. I opened the tube and lifted the glass to let the gases around the candle equalise and as the sweep hand passed twelve, lowered the glass and started the wheel. I sat back watching the flame

jumping around in its strange, mesmerising dance and fell asleep. Not that I nodded off for more than ten or fifteen minutes. When I woke up the candle was out, so I had missed the time it took. Too tired to carry on I switched off the motor and disconnected the wheel. Then I took hold of the glass dome to remove the candle but the dome didn't move. Half asleep, obviously. I opened the valve on the tube which gave a loud and lengthy sucking, whistling sound like nothing I had heard from it before. "That was a strange noise," I thought as I headed wearily towards the bed-settee.

The next day my subconscious must have been turning it over in the back of my mind, because I suddenly remembered the noise made by the tube the night before. It was far beyond the force of the sound that should have been made because, obviously, once the candle went out no more oxygen was left, so mostly nitrogen would have been under the glass. How could the relatively inert nitrogen have been pushed out of the dome to produce the deeper vacuum that the violent whistling sound suggested? What had happened inside the dome while I was asleep? So, during the business of the day at work, the candle experiments were being put aside and a new series with my old luggage scales was being devised somewhere in the back of my brain. By the time I was home, washed and fed the idea had come into focus.

Setting up George's equipment and switching on, without a candle, I used a spring balance luggage scale hooked through the handle of the glass to lift the dome. When the valves went out I knew it was

off the base-board. It weighed about a kilo. Putting the lid back on, I ran the wheel for one minute, and then it took just over 1.5 kilos to lift the lid. This was amazing as there was no candle present to eat the oxygen. After re-airing the machine, I ran the wheel for five minutes. This time it took 3.5 kilos before the lid came away with a sucking noise and then it settled back to 1 kilo. So more gas was lost. Then I ran the wheel for 15 minutes, and couldn't lift the lid at all. The scale was calibrated up to 40 kilos, but long before that could be reached the whole contraption was being lifted off the table. So, I was left in no doubt that a vacuum was being created under the glass dome, even without a candle, by the action of the wheel. Something happened, presumably between the electrodes, with or without a flame, to create a vacuum. When I finally opened the tap on the sunken brass tube, the air whistled violently back in, as it had done the night before.

It struck my head eventually that I was looking at this problem upside down. The machine wasn't creating a vacuum, that is, it wasn't making something extra, it was actually removing the air from inside the glass and that was why the candles failed more quickly. Just how two solid looking electrodes could remove air from inside the glass was a point to wonder at. I took the magnifying glass and examined the brass electrodes, but they were solid. I even unscrewed them from the base-board looking for tubes that could evacuate the air when the machine was running. There were no tubes, just two solid brass terminals that joined to

the electrodes. No air came out through the tube in front, because the tap was closed during the experiments. The wires from the electrodes were embedded in grooves that were sealed with some type of waxy filler where they went under the sides of the glass dome. The wooden base was solid and polished, and careful scrutiny with the magnifying glass couldn't reveal a hole. The glass dome was also solid. In desperation I held it upside down under the tap and filled it with water. No leaks. I had to conclude that there was just no normal way for the air to leave from under that glass.

In my meagre possessions was a small crocodile clip set vertically on a short wire which was inserted into a pyramid-shaped base. I have no idea what it was intended for but I used it to clip in reminders to myself which were left on the small shelf by my front door. Remembering how the flame behaved with the wheel turning, I placed a piece of my notepaper upright in the clip and stood it between the electrodes in the hope that that might reveal a clue. Glass cover on. In the instant I started the wheel, there was a hole through the paper, completely round slightly smaller than a quarter of an inch across. Removing the lid, I took up the paper to examine it with the magnifier. There was no sign of charring around the hole and, when I sniffed it, no smell of burning – just a very neat circular hole. Now, this suddenly raised matters into another level altogether. Mysteriously burning up oxygen or creating vacuums is one thing, but mysteriously cutting holes...

The next victim was a piece of cardboard ripped

from a cornflakes packet - with the same result. Then I realised why there was a push-button. It was only necessary to trigger the machine once to cut a hole, the wheel was needed to produce multiple triggers to empty the dome of gas, as in the candle experiments. So, I moved the cardboard across slightly and made another hole with the button. I checked the cardboard then – still no scorching or smell of burning. I was afraid, I think, to jump in at the deep end and try something really significant. Next came a paperback book that I just couldn't get on with. Standing between the electrodes, slightly fanned open to keep itself up, it looked far more useful than on the bookshelf. Muttering a "sorry" to the absent author, I pressed the button and drilled a hole straight through it. On checking it I found the holes in each cover were slightly elliptical because they were at an angle to the line of the electrodes. I tried again with the whole book turned forty-five degrees to the electrodes. The hole corresponded. When I flicked the pages of the book, the elliptical hole appeared to march across the page like it was a thing alive, while the former circular hole stood still.

By this time I was blown in the head. There was no instrument capable of making holes like this that had come to my notice. I had been around industry for some time, so wouldn't I have heard of such a thing? Its uses in factories as a bladeless, drill-less cutter, fitted to a jigsaw rig, would surely have made it widely known. I could <u>now</u> understand the care which went into protecting the operator with a glass dome controlled by a buried switch that would

turn the machine off if the dome was lifted out of place.

Still dodging any big questions, I next tried a block of wood. It had originally been a small cutting board complete with a selection of cheeses that I had received one Christmas. It balanced there nicely on edge – and then it had a hole, and then another, and then one at an angle and finally, as it just fitted in the space, one through it from edge to edge. Holding it up to the light, revealed that all the holes were perfectly made, without singeing. Looking through the last hole was like looking down a gun barrel, the straightness was so completely accurate and smooth. Finally, I took a copper coin out of my pocket and fitted it into the crocodile clip and stood it on the paperback book for height between the electrodes. Close lid, close tube and press the button - and there is a coin with a hole in it. It was just too easy and it was way too much for me. I went to bed and quickly slept.

It continued hounding me the next day, at work, as a problem in the back of my mind. Where did the little circles of paper, cardboard, wood and even metal go? There was no swarf scattered around as if drilled, no dribbles or smell of burning as if melted and no ragged, split edges as if pierced. To top it all, if the machine was left on with the wheel going round all the gas inside could be exhausted and leave a vacuum. So anything solid or gaseous, and presumably liquid, between the electrodes simply disappeared. How? And where to? These were real mysteries.

That evening I couldn't bring myself to

experiment any more. I don't think I could cope with the consequences. I just sat and stared at the machine. Slowly my eyes were drawn again and again to the pairs of terminals the other side the glass cover. What were they for? Three pairs across in a row and one solitary pair behind, just in front of the raised plate of the valves. They all had knurled nuts, so something could and perhaps should be connected across them. I found some wire and screwed four pieces of it down between the contacts and switched on. Nothing. The valves lit, it should have made a hole in the test piece of cardboard, but it didn't. So that was a bit of a let down. I removed one of the wires and then it worked again. When I put that wire back and removed another one, it still worked. Only with all four wires shorting all the pairs of terminals did it stop working, otherwise it worked. I abandoned the thing, then. Making holes wasn't too impressive once you were certain that it would happen, nor come to that, was making vacuums to suffocate candles when you didn't have a practical need for them. So I put the cover over it and put it back under the bed and got on with my life.

It was during the pursuits of said life that I happened, quite coincidentally, to bump into an old acquaintance who was, I knew, dabbling with old valve-driven wireless and television sets. In the course of our catch-up talk, I couldn't not tell him that I had an odd set which had these terminals that should obviously take something across them, but that I didn't know what.

“There's only a rheostat, really,” he said. “I can't

think what else you could put there. It's a variable resistor. It's what's under the tuning knobs of radios, usually. Hang on I have an old one going spare in the back of the shop."

Good to his word, out he came with a rheostat and gave it to me, as long as I promised to show him exactly what it was that I had at some other point. As it happens, I haven't ever kept my word.

Back home, in the evening, I unwrapped the new acquisition and had a good look at it. It was a tight coil of copper wire, wound in almost a complete circle, like a doughnut, with a knob on top in the centre that moved an electrical pickup around an exposed track of the wound wire allowing varying marked positions on the wire to be contacted. It had three wires coming off it, one from each end of the winding and one from the contact in the centre. This middle contact, with either of the end wires, gave the variable resistance.

Now, with this new addition to the set-up, of course, I had to try it out. So out came George's device. With the lid off and all in position, I screwed the two wires of the rheostat into the first of the sets of terminals, the pair on the left that is. I set it to the zero point. When I plugged it in and switched on nothing happened, because all the other terminals had their wires still in place, so it was like all the terminals were shorted out with wire. Then I turned the knob up to one (of twelve) on the rheostat, and pressed the button. A circular hole appeared in the cardboard. So I tried setting it to two, another circle appeared. On I went all the way up to twelve, and each time a new hole appeared in

the cardboard, and each time it was more difficult to place the cardboard to stay clear of the previous holes. It was fun while it lasted, but I was none the wiser about what was really happening. So I started to pack it all away, leaving the rheostat connected in place.

As I stood up to put on the wooden lid and push the device back under my bed-settee, I saw a couple of little papery bits on the mat towards the fireplace. As I saw them and realised what they were, I actually cried out loud in surprise. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined such a spectacular result from attaching the rheostat, but there it was – in all, three of the quarter-inch discs of cardboard from a cornflakes packet were on the floor, and looking down at George's machine I saw two more inside the glass, hidden from the point of my previous perspective, and one more just behind it, towards the valves.

I picked one up and examined it with the magnifying glass. It was a perfectly formed cardboard disc, with no singeing or fraying of the edges. Together, they would have been mistaken for the left-overs from someone using a college hole punch on a cornflakes packet out of boredom, but to my eye they represented the absolute peak of fascination.

PART 2

There was no quick fix for my nervous system to cope with the surprise of seeing those circles of cardboard on the floor and inside the machine. I had to go to bed in an excited state, as I was on an early shift the next morning, and tossed and turned while my head went into overdrive.

In the morning, after locking my front door and heading for the stairs, I found another one. It was quite visible on the stair, in front of me, as I went down. I couldn't have carried it there previously on my shoe, simply because I hadn't been out there yet. I picked it up and pocketed it.

By the time I was back home, I was ready to try again. Setting the rheostat to six, that is half way, I looked towards the fireplace as I pressed the button. I missed it the first time, but after that I saw the circle of cardboard flutter down from a height of about two feet and land on the mat next to another one. Their distance from the device was about four feet. I turned it up to seven and tried again. This time I missed it coming down but found it almost in the blocked-off fireplace, which was nine or ten feet away. I tried again, turning it down to five. This time I saw it flutter down just past the end of the machine. As the machine was eighteen inches long,

that would make it twenty to twenty-four inches away. A picture was forming, so I turned the rheostat down to one, and, being ready this time, saw the little circle of cardboard flutter down inside the glass, very close to the base of the crocodile clip that I was still using to hold up the pieces of cardboard.

Off-hand, it appeared that each increase in the setting more or less doubled the distance the circle was sent. I was worried about using the low settings 2, 3 and 4 because the circles of cardboard could possibly end up in the machine shorting out wires and could catch fire. The direction of the projections was exactly down the length of the machine and onwards across the room and then out through the wall into the stairs and likely beyond. Suppose I had sent one using the higher settings into a neighbour's flat or, much worse than that, even their body? I was momentarily horrified with the thought of someone, even me, having to go to hospital with a circle of cornflakes packet embedded in their brain or kidney. Could one materialise in a solid object? I didn't see any reason why not, if they could materialise in the air. So, I couldn't use the low settings in case the vacuum tubes were damaged, as, if one materialised inside the glass of a valve, the valve would surely fail, if not explode. I couldn't use the high settings in case one created havoc for someone else, because if the doubling of distance was correct then setting twelve would send them something like a hundred yards away.

These consideration had me pinned down for

some time as I processed the possibilities in my head. Finally, an idea came to me which hopefully would not risk anything bad. So far I had only put the rheostat across the first of the three terminals. What would happen on the others? If I kept to position five on the dial, apparently only sending them about two feet, there might not be too much risk to others. So I tried it. I took off the rheostat, replaced it with the wire from the central terminals, and put it in the centre. I replaced the cardboard with a piece of thickish paper ripped from a pad that could stand upright on its own. I thought the paper might do less damage if things went wrong. The time then came to switch on, after I had checked for the tenth time that the dial on the rheostat was on five. A hole appeared and a small circle of paper fluttered to the table top about two feet from the centre of the glass dome, but now there was a difference. It had landed to the right-hand side of the machine, not in line with it. I tried again with the dial set to six, and the paper fluttered down about four feet from the centre of the dome, but again off to the side. It was obvious that this was a different dimension being utilised, and what remained, the other terminals on the right, should, therefore, throw things vertically.

Such a sweeping assumption had to be tested once at least. I changed over the rheostat and the wire, but was a bit worried in case the paper went downwards into the flat below. So I set up everything on the kitchen table and dragged it to the centre of the floor where it had a three foot clearance in all directions. Setting it on five which

should have been about two foot from the centre, judging from previous tests, I was ready to go. The trouble was that I was a bit overwhelmed by the whole thing. I felt like I was galloping on a run-away horse into the unknown without a seat-belt. Anyway, I pressed the button eventually, and the hole appeared and, down from the air above, the circle of paper fluttered and came to rest on the top of the glass dome. So it was up and not down in the vertical, and clear that the three terminals controlled the three dimension – the left pair threw things down the line of the device, the middle threw them off to the right and the right ones threw them up, vertically. But my nerves were shot and I was breaking out into a cold sweat from the tension of it all. The perceived risks were weighing very heavily upon my mind. I unplugged the machine and went to bed.

I dreamt of a contraption with a wheel working the switch that threw water up the side of a house twenty feet into the air to a tank, then used a row of dynamos to gather electricity from it as it fell back down a tube and into a lower tank where the electrodes were waiting to throw it back up again. With this continuous cycle, taking energy from the descending water, the machine was able to power itself and all the lights of the house from the dynamos. Endless free energy. Whee! I think I was delirious.

The next evening I sat myself down to try some experiments. I put the coffee table with George's device on the floor at the far end of the room, in the left-hand corner, pointing along the wall, and

connected the rheostat to the middle pair of terminals which should send the paper circles sideways, to the right, and therefore into the room. Setting the dial to five, I pressed the button and down dropped the circle, just past the machine. I fired it ten times on this setting and produced a little pile of paper. Then I measured the distance from the centre of the pile to the centre of the electrodes, it was almost 24 inches. Next, of course, I tried ten shots with six on the dial – 48 inches. As the machine was in the corner of the room I tried the dial on seven and measured about 8 feet as the result. So finally I had the proof of doubling the distance with each position on the dial. Working it out gave me a rough table of distances:

Dial	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Dist.	0	1.5in	3in	6in	1ft	2ft	4ft	8ft	5yd	10yd	20yd	40yd	80yd

Now that I was no longer using the left-hand terminals for the rheostat, I didn't have to worry about the valves. So I tried settings of one and two – and made little piles of paper under the glass at one to two inches and three inches from the centre, so these agreed with the extrapolations of the table. Then I tried three on the dial and made a messy pile just outside the glass dome, on and off the machine, which had slid down the side of the glass and was nearer to seven inches away instead of six. Finally, I tried four, which I hadn't dared try again because the valves were a foot away in the other direction, and made a neat pile just twelve inches away.

Satisfyingly, the table of distances was confirmed and I felt like a proper scientist. Even so, I didn't dare try anything higher than seven or it would have ended up outside the flat.

I started thinking. Clearly, it seemed, if I obtained another rheostat and put it on the left-hand pair of terminals with the original still in the middle, I would be able to send things on a diagonal. Perhaps using a setting of six on each, the papers would go four feet forward and four feet to the right, ending up at a point four times the square root of two away – that is 4 x 1.4142 or about 5 ft 8 in. Now, if I had three rheostats... but perhaps it was best not to bother going any further with that. If I put both rheostats in series on the same pair of terminals the distances should keep increasing very rapidly, and with both on twelve – I had to sit and calculate – the papers would fly about 200 miles away. I had to wonder, that now I could project something away from me, to the right and upwards, how the machine would work to project things towards me, to the left or downwards. Not that I needed to, but the other half of each dimension was speaking up for itself in my head. It seemed that if putting a resistance across a terminal, whose effect would be to reduce the current slightly threw the object to the right, then if the current was slightly increased by the same amount by adding to it from an outside source, then the object would perhaps go to the left. However, I'm not an electrician and it didn't sound too convincing, and I definitely wasn't going to try. Anyway, perhaps the machine considered itself to be at the absolute extremity of

each dimension, so that towards me, to the left and downwards didn't exist for it. I felt it was quite lucky that it was towards me that didn't happen or, initially, I could have had a cornflakes boxful of cardboard wedged inside me, or even a stick of wood from the cheeseboard. Worse, a copper disc from the coin which would have looked like a flattened pellet, and that I had been mysteriously shot without leaving an entry hole.

Anyway, the previous idea brought me to thinking about the military implications of being able to throw lumps of metal 200 miles or more away with ease. Perhaps red hot metal that could start fires or burn people from the inside. One red hot piece of copper projected into the enemy arsenal would be enough, or a few "packets" of nerve gas into an enemy submarine. I began to have some idea why George had kept the device a secret. He had been through the war, so he must have seen more than enough suffering and death. It wasn't difficult to appreciate his dilemma. On the one hand, he couldn't risk it falling into the hands of the authorities and becoming a weapon, but on the other, he couldn't face destroying it. I must have seemed innocuous enough, and perhaps he was right, because I felt no inclination towards revealing the existence of such a machine to anybody else.

What had gripped my mind at that point, was the method by which the new "arrival" integrated itself into the fabric of the receiving medium. It was clear from the vacuum gradually created in the glass dome, that when "something," gas or solid, left from there a complete nothingness was left behind.

But what happened at the other end? Did the molecules already occupying the target space move out of the way? Or did the molecules of the two things share the space with the increase in density involved? Again the military thinking broke in. Imagine projecting more and more uranium into a warhead – it would be pushed into critical mass and explode. So I decided some experimentation was needed on the point. (Not, of course, with uranium.)

On the way home the next day, I picked up a couple of offcuts from a timber yard. They were end pieces of four by four's, that is four inch square wooden posts used as fence posts. I managed to find a couple almost cubical in shape. Once home, I weighed them both on the kitchen scales. The smaller one, a bit thinner that is, was 220gm while the thicker one was 271gm. You will have to excuse my mixture of systems, I grew up during the change from our imperial units to the metric of the Système International, becoming jack of both but master of neither. With the machine set up on the left of the coffee table and a pile of encyclopaedias two feet high to the right of it with the scales on top, to equal the height of the electrodes, I used paper to gauge the exact position to place the larger block to receive the expected spindles I would attempt to send from the slightly smaller block under the glass dome.

The rheostat was set to five, so all was ready. After the first hole appeared in the smaller block, nothing had changed so I took off the dome, moved both blocks slightly and tried again. Still nothing

showed, but the scales had gone up to 272gm. On I went moving blocks and watching the scales. After twelve trials, the scales had gone up to 280gm. I weighed the smaller piece, that looked like a cubist's idea of a Swiss cheese, and it weighed 210gm. So, as far as it went, I had at least shown that a solid target area would not stop the projection. But, of course, wood is a good building material because it can be nailed, because the fibres collapse and move out of the way of the nails. I needed something more solid.

So next, after some little thought, I decided to sacrifice a pair of glass paperweights that had once taken my fancy, but were now neglected. I was a bit afraid of using anything made of metal. It seemed to me that the glass of the paperweights would not be able to move out of the way as the wood fibres may have done. They were the usual flattened balls with a few bubbles inside and a pattern on the bottom. They weighed 320gm each. With one inside the dome and one on the scales, I closed my eyes and pressed the button. The paperweight in the dome had a hole straight through it, while the one on the scales had a cloudiness that ran through the centre of it and had grown a little lump on one side, because of a slight mis-positioning on my part. The scales, however, said 322gm. I moved both paperweights slightly, and prepared to try again. What I wasn't prepared for was the bang as the paperweight on the scales burst into a thousand pieces as I touched the button. Glass is, of course, a frozen liquid, and not at all suitable for such experimentation as the stresses involved are too

great for it. I already knew that – didn't I? It took a whole hour to pick up all the pieces of glass, but at least none of them had damaged George's device or me.

The smashing of the glass ball worried me. I was too far out of my depth for such experimentation, really. A bit of a cowboy, to say the least, and in some danger. As they say, "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." It took me a few days to come up with a different test which I hoped would be safe. Using metals seemed to be the only way to answer the question of how two things could occupy the same space. But soft metals, aluminium and copper, I wasn't looking to create a bomb. I found in a junk shop a roughly cubical piece of solid aluminium and a much smaller piece of copper. I filled completely with water, my one litre measuring jug stood in an empty bowl. I lowered the aluminium block on a thread into the jug until it sat on the bottom. Lifting it back out I was able to read off the amount of water that could stay in the jug with the aluminium – it was about 670ml. I then emptied the jug and poured in the overflow from the bowl that the aluminium had pushed out – it was about 320ml. This gave a starting volume of 320 – 330ml for the block of aluminium. With the aluminium on the scales, positioned exactly, I hoped, this time, it weighed 870gm. Putting the smaller piece of copper under the dome, between the electrodes, I crossed my fingers and toes, and anything else that would cross, and pushed the button.

At least it didn't explode. There was a hole in the

two inch block of copper and the scales now gave a weight of 884gm – an increase of 14 grams. I moved them both slightly, and tried again. Two holes and 898gm on the scales. Three more runs gave five holes and a final weight of 942gm. Now came the proof of the pudding. Filling the measuring jug with a litre of water again, I lowered the augmented block of aluminium into the water and collected the run off again in the bowl. The readings of the water were almost identical at about 670ml and 320 ml. So here was the proof, the block of aluminium had absorbed 72gm of copper without changing size. So the copper had interpenetrated the aluminium, the aluminium did not expand to make room for it and the density of the block, therefore, had increased. Taking a small general purpose hacksaw, I cut into the aluminium block with ease, but in certain places the blade would not penetrate. I sliced along the side of one of these places, surely where one of the rods of copper had gone. The metal inside was too hard to cut with the amateur saw. It didn't look like aluminium or copper or even a blend of both, it had a yellowish tinge and where the friction of the saw had heated it, it gave off a peculiar smell. I was becoming over-excited again, so packed up and went to bed.

During the night, after the intense concentration and anxiety during the experiments with metal, I fell into a delirious state. The risk of sticking a spindle of copper into my innards or blowing myself up played havoc with my nerves, and as I relaxed I entered into a weird dream state. I was an alchemist of the middle-ages trying to make gold,

not from lead, but from copper and tin, the two components of bronze. Anachronistically, there was George's machine and I was projecting spindles of solid tin into copper blocks. The resultant alloy blocks were melted down, the bronze mixture poured off leaving spindles of pure gold. I was at it all night.

Incidentally, as the alchemist, I realised that our condescending attitude towards them is only fuelled by our snobbery towards them. They only had four elements, ha, ha, when we have more than a hundred. Actually they didn't mean the same thing. Their elements were states of matter. Earth for solids, Water for liquids, Air for gases and Fire for pure energy. In the transfer of energy, Earth represented conduction, Water convection, Air radiation and Fire the instantaneous transfer of thought within the Mind. Of course, thought, being free of the causal laws of Space/Time, would be free to roam within time and space, giving extra credence to the communications with the past of George's wife and the Chinese. Anyway, I could find little with which our modern science would argue.

When I woke up, I looked up my periodic chart of the elements and, surprisingly, found that copper has an atomic number of 29 and tin 50. When you add 29 to 50 you get 79, the atomic number of gold. Of course, I thought, atomic number wasn't good enough, because there were neutrons also in the atoms. As I had been told by George, neutrons can be thought of as collapsed atoms of hydrogen, the surrounding electron having been forced into a

much, much tighter orbit around the proton, giving them slightly greater mass. Counting the atomic masses instead gave copper 63, tin 118 and gold not 181 (63+118) but 196. Still, it was only a dream. Perhaps adding a bit of lead at 207, as the alchemists reportedly used, would have balanced up the equation.

During the following day something nagged in the back of my brain. It wasn't connected with the dream though, some other unfinished business in the testing of George's device. Finally, it wriggled its way into consciousness. The other terminals, that solitary pair of terminals behind the other three. What was that pair there for? It could be as a magnifier of effect, increasing the projection distance or maybe a refinement of distance allowing more accurate positioning of target objects, or even a reversal of direction throwing the spindles in the other three directions i.e. left, down and backwards. I had no idea, but decided that that night I would find out.

When the machine was set up, I took the rheostat off the middle terminals of the three pairs to put it on the single pair on the back of the board next to the raised valve plate. Instantly I could see a problem. Without a rheostat on one of the row of three terminals, I had no idea what would be happening - no sense of distance or direction for the projected item. If, for instance, this terminal reversed the direction of motion, I needed another rheostat to set the direction and distance in the first place. Otherwise, short-circuited – it went nowhere or open-circuited - it probably went to the opposite

infinity. (That's where I had come to assumed all the early open-circuit tests had projected the various gases and flames and paper and cardboard. If reducing the current with the rheostat increased the distance of the projection then the maximum reduction, all the way to zero, of an open-circuit must throw things the maximum distance – infinity.) So, either way, nowhere or infinity, the change brought about by the rheostat on the back terminals wouldn't show anything. Feeling completely deflated before I had even begun, I went through the pre-planned motions anyway, set it to one, put it on the back terminals, shorted all three front ones with wire and put paper in between the electrodes. When I pressed the button, I wasn't expecting anything, I was only thinking vaguely on the the possibility of getting more rheostats. I saw the customary hole appear in the paper and jumped. How could that be? All three dimensional terminals were short-circuited so no movement could be expected. I looked again.

No. How stupid of me, I was mistaken. Through force of habit my brain had visualised the hole as usual. It was a complete piece of paper, there was no hole. That was a shock. My mind was beginning to play tricks on me. I laughed to myself as I pressed the button again – it disappeared again. The paper had a hole in it. I bent down and looked closely, in time to see the hole fill up again.

The amazement was total. I had quickly come to accept sending little cylinders of some substance around the room, like it was the most natural thing, like I had always been able to do it – but this?

I set the rheostat to two, pressed the button and watched. There was the hole, and, wait for it – filled in again. The paper was complete. I tried it on three and it happened again – just a longer delay in the return of the circle of paper. This suggested another table, so, paper and pencil ready, I went through the numbers 3 to 8 with my alarm clock, twice each, and produced this table of times:

Dial	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Delay	0	2s	4s	8s	16s	32s	1m	2m	4m	8m	16m	32m	1h

I extrapolated from the readings to fill in the ends of the table and the higher numbers are approximate, for brevity. However, these times showed again a doubling with each setting. The machine "hid" the circle of paper for an increasing length of time. Why it should hide the object between the electrodes was a mystery. Where did it hide it, or was it still there, invisible? The idea of invisibility sparked my interest more. Could it still be there but be invisible? I became excited.

An invisibility ray. That was something I could test. I set the machine to eight, which gave me four minutes, pressed the button and made the hole. Then I opened the glass dome and removed the crocodile clip with the paper to have a close look at it. There was the hole, as usual, no singeing or smell. A little bit warily, I pushed the tip of a pencil towards the hole – it went through. There was nothing there and so no invisibility. I was a bit deflated at that and put the clip and paper down on the table and stared at them. If the paper circle was

gone, where was it? The other terminals were all short-circuited so there should have been no movement of the paper, yet it was gone. This new pair of terminals contained a more twisted secret. In answer to my question, as I stared at the opened machine, a circle of paper fluttered down onto the board between the electrodes. The four minutes were up.

How long I sat looking at the piece of paper, I am not able to guess, thoughts were tumbling. The machine had hidden the circle of paper and after four minutes put it back. If I hadn't disturbed the set up it would have appeared back in the hole it was taken from. But, where was the paper taken for four minutes? The answer was knocking on the door in my head, but I just couldn't let it in – not easily. I thought that I might as well ask where people go when they die. Nobody knows, they're just hidden from us. But then again, they don't suddenly come back. Finally, I had to fall over the obvious as a brainwave. It wasn't hidden at all, it was simply projected through time, into the future.

This was just that answer that ticked all the boxes, except the one that contained my ability to accept it. Space I could accept, but Time... If it went into the future, where all things go anyway, how could it be tested. How could I tell if a circle of paper had travelled through time or not? Now if it was a piece of copper, for example, it could be heated up and then sent, and if it came out still hot after, say, 30 minutes, it must have gone through time or it would have had to have cooled down. That utterly inspired, random, throw-away thought

became the epicentre of a new, hastily contrived, experiment.

Setting up the block of copper I had previously used on a wire gauss on a small tripod over the top of a tea-light candle would do the trick. I lit the flame to give the candle time to heat up the copper. I set the dial on the rheostat to eleven, which should give thirty-two minutes. Finally, judging the copper to be hot after two minutes, I put the glass dome on and pressed the button. A new tubular hole appeared in the copper.

As it was late by then, I opened up the glass, removed the hot items with a kitchen cloth and packed everything away. The piece of hot copper was placed on a saucer. After twenty minutes I felt the copper and it was almost cold again. I still had to wait. I sat in front of the table watching, one eye on the clock and one on the point where I expected the copper to appear. 30 minutes... 31 minutes... 32 minutes... still nothing... and suddenly, it fell to the table. I reached for it, eager to see if it was still hot – it was. It burnt my fingers. On the table was a thin scorch mark where it had fallen. So there was the proof, it had been projected forward in time by 32 minutes.

While holding my fingers under the cold tap, thought crowded in. If restricting the current with a resistor sent things into the future, then adding to the current, with that unknown-to-me device, would send them into the past. So if a piece of copper was repeatedly sent back a few seconds onto itself it would increase in density exponentially with who knows what result. I remembered the glass

paperweight. Furthermore, when the paper disappeared and re-appeared, it didn't come back into a vacuum, that stayed empty, patiently waiting for it, it re-entered a space now filled with air. So the air molecules must have become embedded in the fabric of the paper. So, again, if a piece of copper was repeatedly sent forward into an empty, future space, its crystalline structure would eventually break down from the ingested air molecules causing it to crumble or worse. The copper seemed to be out of luck either way. On that, I went to bed – early shift the next day.

As sleep was coming some thinking was still pestering me, as it always did. It needed a name. I couldn't keep thinking of it as George's machine or George's device. But what else did I know of it? By definition, it was a transmitter of matter through space and, I now knew, through time. (S)pace/(T)ime (T)ransmitter (O)f (M)atter just about summed it up. And so ST TOM was christened – although only by me, and only <u>for</u> me.

By this time I was fed up putting on the lid and taking it off again at each use of St Tom. It wasn't a lightweight and was both eminently drop-able and breakable. So the next afternoon I traced the channel in the wooden base that took the wires from the safety switch embedded in the groove for the lid back to the connectors under the raised valve plate. I dug out the switch wires and shorted them together so that the machine would operate without the lid. Wasn't that just a trifle risky? Absolutely? I couldn't answer that, but decided to give it a try, anyway.

Using the copper block again on the previous night had given me another idea. Why was I confined to projecting quarter inch diameter rods of the test substance? That was the size of the electrodes, yes, but did that matter? They could have been thinner or thicker. How was the electrode diameter decided upon? Could it be that the power consumption of the vacuum tubes would not allow the electrodes to be any larger? There was no George to answer that, so a test was called for. I rushed out and bought some bits of sheet copper and copper tubing just as the shops were closing. It didn't take long to cut out two three inch discs of copper and solder, perpendicularly, to each of their centres a short piece of tubing that would fit over the electrodes of St Tom firmly enough to give a good electrical contact. These would, when in place, open up the quarter inch diameter of the electrodes to a whopping three inches. Twelve times the diameter and 144 times the cross-sectional area and so 144 times the volume of the projected item.

Pushing the discs securely into place on the ends of the electrodes, I positioned the copper block, or what was left of it, on an old book to give it a bit more height between the newly expanded electrodes. I left the 4 pairs of terminals as they were set from the night before, so expected the copper to disappear for 32 minutes. I switched St Tom on at the wall socket and the valves lit up straight away, just as if the lid was properly in place. When I pressed the button, however, nothing happened. The copper stayed put. That was a bit

disappointing, but worse was to follow. I removed the copper block and the book and double checked that the fit of the additional discs was adequate to give a good contact. This necessitated kneeling down awkwardly in front of the table while checking it over and I had ended up with my head almost between the electrodes. I was oblivious to the continuing hum and blue light of the vacuum tubes. With one last look over the backs of the two discs to make sure all the pairs of contacts were properly in place, I watched myself, across the top of the valves, walking out of the room. Through the door I went, looking a bit lost in thought, and turned right, into the kitchen.

I sat back on my heels, doubting what I had seen. The picture was so clear though, that I could not truly doubt its reality. That was me, in every detail. Not that I am used to seeing myself from behind. I didn't realise I stooped quite so much. I appeared quite a slouch from behind. The games teacher would tell me such things in the past, but I never seriously listened to him as he was generally known as a sadist. When I look in a mirror, I don't see the stoop. For all that, how could I see myself walking out of the room? Then I realised. St Tom had the dome off but the safety switch had been “cleverly” overridden. There had been a chance, as I knelt in front of it, of an accidental press of the switch activating the machine. Part of my head could have disappeared. I had a mini panic attack and knelt, in a cold sweat, and stared, first at Tom then at the door across the room then back to Tom, in wonderment. Finally, I shook myself out of it. I

had a dry mouth and my remaining brain needed a caffeine fix. Still deep in thought, I got up awkwardly from the floor, I was slightly stiff from the posture I had adopted, kneeling in front of the coffee table. I walked over to the door and naturally turned right, into the kitchen, to make some coffee.

Then I knew. I had been kneeling on the floor in contemplative awe for 32 minutes.

PART 3

How could there be two of me at the same time? One walking out of the room and one still in the room, watching. If I had turned back from the door to look into the room would I have seen the other version of me kneeling on the floor behind the table? It didn't seem possible. When I went back with the cup of coffee, there was nobody there.

I was very shaken by this new development and especially the risk of nearly zapping half my head to infinity, and didn't want to use Tom again that evening. I felt strangely abused by the whole business, as well. It was as if my private, personal being and world had been touched in some way, interfered with, molested. Seeing myself leaving the room, 32 minutes into the future, was in a such a vastly different league to merely throwing paper circles around the room, let alone starving candle

flames of oxygen. All that was now far, far away, in the long distant past.

I had a lot of thought to plough through. It seemed that Tom was creating a field of effect between the electrodes even from the time it was switched on at the wall and the valves activated. That is, before I ever clicked the ON switch, it was affecting the space between the electrodes. Now that I had removed the buried safety switch and the glass dome and enlarged the electrodes, the truth could be literally "seen." Quickly, to test this, I removed the copper discs extending the electrodes and set the rheostat to eight minutes in the future. Holding a sheet of paper at arms length I passed it up and down between the electrodes. But nothing happened. I had thought that a hole should appear, however it didn't. After about 30 seconds of trying, I clicked the switch with my other hand and the hole appeared. Then I removed the paper and unplugged Tom while I waited. After the eight minutes were over, a disc of paper appeared between the electrodes and fluttered down. So, all was in working order, but why had I not seen the hole before pressing the button?

With the discs in place, and my eyes accidentally between them, I had seen myself in the future. This effect I regarded as an "aura." My mother was a martyr to migraines and usually had warning auras before an attack, that is visual disturbances of spectral colours or jagged lines around her field of vision which became a recognisable sign. The word seemed appropriate. So why, without the discs, had I not seen the expected aura of the hole before

pressing the button? Mind you, I had never seen anything like an aura with any of the experiments before. Why not?

Putting the discs back onto the electrodes, I contrived to support a sufficiently large piece of cardboard between them. Plugging in St Tom, together with the hum and glow of the vacuum tubes, a large hole appeared in the cardboard. This was the desired aura. Why it showed now and not with the bare electrodes was a mystery. I tapped the "hole" with the tip of a pencil, half of which immediately disappeared as it entered the field of effect. I felt the pressure of the tap through its "stump" in my fingers and saw the cardboard wobble slightly. So there was no hole really, it was just an aura.

As I gazed abstractedly at Tom, an idea crept into my head. I can't claim that I thought it, it just came to me, with the name tag, "edge-effect." So I took a twelve inch ruler, held by the ends, and with its centre invisible, measured the exact width of the hole. It was two and three quarter inches across, tested from many angles. So the aura was one eighth of an inch smaller in radius than the discs which produced it. With that everything fell into place. The brass electrodes were made as big as they could be without showing an aura, at one eighth of an inch radial cross-section, or a quarter of an inch diameter. Eminently satisfied with this explanation, I had nothing else to do but press the button and create the real three inch hole. There was a sickening pop and St Tom went out. No hum, no blue light and no hole. I had killed Tom.

Crestfallen, I packed it away.

It took two days and nights to overcome the doubts and fears and get St Tom out again. Thankfully, as I had come to suspect and ardently hope, it was only the fuse in the wall plug which had gone, and with a new fuse in place, St Tom lit up as usual. I turned it off again at the socket. Perhaps the size of the electrodes had been determined by the power consumption, not the size of the edge-effect of the aura. Either way, in those two days of doubt, I had managed to dream up a new plan. But before any of that could be put into practice, I had to ensure that Tom could not be triggered accidentally. I removed the front switch from its contacts and also the thumb nuts that tightened down onto the contacts and put them into the drawer with the wheel. Then I glued lengths of insulation cut from electric wires over the brass contacts until they were completely isolated. Happy, finally, I felt certain that Tom could not be triggered by accident. With the beast so anaesthetised, I turned to putting my plan into action.

First take the rheostat off the temporal contacts – I could confidently call them that, now – and put it back on the left-hand spatial contacts, the ones that sent things straight ahead past the valves. Then set it to zero – no distance. Then kneeling on the floor, facing the length of Tom with my back to the wall, I put my chin on the base-board and sighted around. Clearly it could work as planned. If I moved my head forwards, my eyes and most of the top of my head would be between the snake electrodes

enlarged with the copper discs. Reminding myself that I had actually survived the previous session, I plucked up the courage to go and plug it in. The valves came on. Finally, back in front of it with nothing else I could think of to hold me back but my fear of death, I again put my chin on the base-board. As, very slowly, I slid my chin forwards into line with the copper discs, an electrical thrill passed through my head and ran down into my body. It was mild, like dipping into cool bath water, but contained a feeling of dread. As my eyes entered the field there was no noticeable effect on my vision. This was expected, because the rheostat was still set to zero.

From that slightly awkward kneeling position, as I forced myself to hold it and over-ride the feelings of impending doom and a desire to pull my head out, the valves looked very close, glowing with their ethereal blue light. I could see parts of the doorway across the room above, between and even under them, in the space down where the connectors and wires were. I tried to make myself comfortable, to ignore the spreading feeling of panic. I was somewhat bolstered when remembering the thrill down the spine that people who see ghosts are supposed to feel as contact is approaching. Perhaps that is electrical as well.

Finally, as calmly as I could, I reached for the rheostat with my left hand and began very slowly to turn the knob. The valves grew and leapt towards me. I closed my eyes, stopped turning and zeroed the dial, but then as I opened my eyes, all was well, just as before. I had to analyse this motion of the

valves before continuing. As I turned the knob, no further than position one, the valves, being the nearest things to my eyes, had appeared to move towards me. I had no sensation of motion of myself or my point of view. The valves did the moving and came looming towards me. This point being settled to my satisfaction, I continued.

Again I increased the rheostat and the valves came towards me, but this time I was ready. They came so close that I was inside their glass covers, looking at the various electrical wires and glowing plates that make them up. Then they were gone apparently through me and I was looking at the doorway into my tiny hall as it came marching towards me. Then I was in the hall, at the front door, low down, I had never seen it quite from that angle before, and then through, bypassing the corridor, it became difficult to keep the motion steady, I was rushing now, careering through the flimsy wall into my neighbours flat, through the doubled outer brick wall into the flats next door, and then again and again and galloped to a sudden stop, up in the air, in the middle of the side street that is almost a hundred yards away as the rheostat reached twelve.

I lifted my head up and out of Tom. A feeling of panic swept over me as I "normalised" back into the room. It really produced a very odd state in the head engaging with Tom in this way. I felt a disorientation like disembarking from a boat after hours at sea, when the solid and steady dry land feels like its moving. On an impulse, I put my head back into position, my head swam, my

consciousness was in danger of being overcome, but I was hovering over the road round the corner again. I watched a distinctive yellow estate car below me, approach the corner and indicate a left turn. I quickly backed out of the machine and wobbled to the window in time to see that very same car passing by in front of the house. So it was true. That actually was the road round the corner I had been looking at. Not that I had really doubted it, but the proof of the estate car gave an extra weight of objectivity to the solely subjective experience I had of these things – gave them more impact. I walked back to Tom, reached down and zeroed the dial.

Something of an idea had struck me while viewing the valves as I passed through them and I wanted confirmation with a less active object. I had various papers in a small, portable, filing case next to the bed-settee, and I put this, sideways on, at the other end of the table. Getting back into position, and being prepared for the derangement in my head, I entered my face into the energy field of the aura between the electrodes and began to wind up the rheostat slowly. After the valves, the case approached me and then the outer skin of it dissolved and revealed a rectangular patch of uniform blackness. I backed out slightly and the side of the case returned to view in its place. What was this black blob about? It clicked, eventually. The black rectangular shape was the inside of the case, which was completely dark because the lid was closed. I got up and opened the top lid of the case showing the tops of the individual files inside.

Back to Tom, wind the rheostat and now as the side dematerialises while the case moves towards me, I can dimly see the sides of the individual hanging files. Further in and the files disappear and blackness comes again, obviously the light doesn't reach down into the body of the files where the papers plump them out. More thinking.

Then I had a brainwave. Why not use the torch to shine on the files? This was madness, I thought, as I went to the cupboard to get my battery torch, but I had to try it, because I had thought of it. So back into position, there was the blackness inside the case and I switched on the torch. Nothing happened, of course, the torch was in my right hand on the table top beside me shining on the outside of the file case. I hadn't quite thought this through yet. Then I brought the torch up into the space between the copper electrodes next to my eyes and the files lit up. It was as if I was actually there within the dissected case looking at the files in the full light of the torch. By winding slightly forwards I could see parts of individual letters and forms, bank letters, electricity and gas bills, the rent book, water and sewage bills, my old psych report and apologetic letters from the dentist because they were going private. I could almost read parts of individual lines from the letters that the torch was able to illuminate. Standing up, slowly, to acclimatise, I turned the filing case so that the files faced towards me and closed the lid. Now I would be able to read whole letters, I optimistically thought. One definite problem, however, I hadn't considered, was that caused by the shape of the aura, because the slice

which was between the circular copper discs actually created a cylindrical volume between them. The files were eaten into by the curving surface, so a multitude of edges of paper and cardboard file showed above and below with only a thin strip in the centre running square on, to be read. To be read, that is, in few cases, because the full sheets were stored on their sides and only small slips were laid vertically and, therefore, readable. But the test was still outrageously successful, I was able to shine a light upon and read some documents, line by line, that were inside a sealed box.

I wound up the rheostat gently and arrived at the door. Turning Tom slightly on the table I faced the wall next to the door. Slowly bringing the wall towards me, I had a view of it dissolving in front of my eyes. I backed off, turned on the torch again and held it up in the cylindrical space, next to my right eye. This time each level of the wall lit up in my eyes as the curving slices were taken out of it. I could see the laths of wood it was composed of, it was a false wall, the plaster board nailed on each side, even some old wallpaper on the lounge side that was pink floral before the present anaglypta painted in magnolia which had been universally added in the flat to hide the cracks. I slowly zeroed the dial and watched the wall shoot backwards across the room, followed by the file case on my right ending with the valves with their blue glow. Shakily, I lifted myself up and out of position.

What a machine! A million uses could be dreamt up for it, just as it was, a prototype. Imagine what a doctor could do with it. Able to look inside the

body of a patient, seeing the living organs and tissue at work, normally or not. Or a surgeon accurately aiming his incisions to remove a cancer or mend a broken bone. What would an archaeologist or palaeontologist do with it, being able to find artifacts or fossils without the hit-or-miss digging around? Or an architect, able to gauge exactly the footings needed for any building? What would the military do with it? Able to find enemy weapons and personnel from the comfort of their armchairs. Imagine an industrial spy with one, able to read the most sensitive papers locked in a rival's safe. Or a thief able to check out a dwelling, case the joint, as they say, without having to reveal himself by leaving home. Or a million perverts looking into a million girls' bedrooms... Or gamblers turning it forwards in time to see the result of a horse race or the fall of lottery or roulette balls. My head was swimming. Even a quick overview like that revealed that the good that could be accomplished with Tom was quickly swamped by the potential wrongnesses. Would it be better if it was kept secret? Surely. Absolutely. Society would not be able to stand against such a power if it were set loose in the world. All the civilization we comfortably knew and lived for would come tumbling down round our ears. I could think or do no more that night, I needed sleep. It was dreamless, timeless.

The next night, after a heavy shift, ready for action again, I decided to see what could be seen from the other side of the phenomenon. When it was dark, I placed the hall mirror on the floor

against the wall next to the lounge door. It was just tall enough to rise above Tom. I then entered the position and wound the dial on the rheostat until the mirror was in front of me. There, looking out through a slit in the mirror, like through a letterbox, was a pair of eyes. I got up and turned off the lounge light. Now, the eyes were painted with an eerie blue glow from the valves. I held the torch next to my head and switched on. Its reflection in the mirror was, of course, blinding in the low light and left me unable to see anything else after that.

With one final test that night, I piled up books to lift the torch up into the line of the electrodes, switched it on and turned the rheostat to twelve. Turning off the lights of the flat, I went down outside and along the road and round the corner and there hanging up in the air some twelve to fifteen feet up was a light. I walked around under it. There was no obvious source, just a disembodied light shining faintly on the side wall of the house across the road. I doubted if anyone would have noticed it amongst the street lights and house lights, it was a pretty poor torch, as such. When I arrived back in the flat, I hurried to put everything away quickly - I didn't feel too well - and went to bed.

That night's sleep was bothered by constant “flying” dreams. I had an awareness for the whole night of flying through unknown rooms, along unknown roads and out over unknown countryside. Back in, sweeping again through corridor after corridor. Offices, hotels or palaces. Then back out, over hills and moors and deserts. All unknown to me. By morning, I was in no state to work, so rang

in sick. I had motion sickness or a moderate vertigo. I stayed in bed for the day, nauseated, like I was suffering from a bad hangover.

By evening the symptoms were passing and I was feeling better. Anyway, I needed to satisfy the urge to test Tom again, but without putting my head into it this time, as I didn't feel up to it. I put the rheostat across the temporal contacts and shorted out the left-hand pair it came from with a wire. Then I set up the books with the torch on top between the electrodes. I set the dial to nine which should have given me about 8 minutes. I shone the torch for one minute, with Tom plugged in and then turned off and put it all away.

I sat in the dark looking at the wall around the doorway. After a little longer than 8 minutes, the wall lit up from a point of light above the table. I could see the shape of the reflector as a kind of shadow from my position behind it, a darker space. The bulb didn't show from my side, so I moved around the table and saw the light clearly. It was just as if there was a torch there. I turned on the room light, and although the torchlight continued to shine, there was no torch to account for it. The question I had wanted answered was whether anything showed from behind the “apparition” in space, and the answer was – no, at least, as long as the room was in darkness at the time. That night I slept like a log. If I had dreams, I had no memory of them, which is just as good.

During my next shift at work, I had decided that the previous experiment to check if the apparition was visible from behind wasn't really very well

done. Of course the back of the torch didn't show, it wasn't lit from anywhere. Even the blue glow from the valves had been mostly blocked by the pile of books the torch was on. So, by the time I had arrived home, I had a new test in mind. I set up as usual, left the nine on the temporal contacts as before to give me eight minutes, but this time I held my left forearm in Tom, between the contacts, for a whole minute. Immediately, of course, that part of my arm disappeared. Looking down on the stump, just below the elbow and at the disembodied hand which floated in the air, weirdly, was beyond me and I had to look away. While it was there, it had a slight tingling feeling, much like the heat from a band of strong sunlight shining across it, which gently spread up and down my whole arm and into my hand. Then I put Tom to one side, and waited. When the time was up, suspended in the air about twelve inches above the table, something white appeared. I shone the torch on it. It was a gruesome sight. It was three inches of detached forearm.

Imagine a glass tube the size of a baked bean tin which had cut across and through a piece of someone's arm, yours that is, and the severed section was still held inside the tube. With the torch, I could see up inside the shirt sleeve at the hairs on the bare arm beneath, but what really shocked was the rounded slice of the cut ends of bone and tissue. My pulse could be seen expanding the deep blood vessels rhythmically. The flow of the blood could be seen coming from the nowhere where the elbow should have been and entering the

cut arteries. Round the other side, towards the wrist that wasn't there, the blood appeared to flow into nothingness. I took up a magnifying glass and was able to examine the layers of skin, fat, muscle, cartilage, bone and marrow in both sides of the curving slice, and even the composition of the blood vessel walls before, after one minute, it disappeared. So that was the real answer to the question. Yes – the apparition absolutely did show from behind, and it could be lit by lights from this world as if it was actually here. I was left feeling satisfied but very queasy. After all, it's not as if I'm a doctor, to be witnessing such things, in such detail, especially as this was my own body in vivisection. If I had been a specialist, what couldn't I have done. Checked subcutaneous fat, the pulse, measured the thickness of deposits in the arteries, and cholesterol in their walls, checked the bones for calcium loss, examined the living tissues with a microscope (why not, if it was visible to the naked eye?) The list went far beyond my limited medical thinking from working in the old people's home.

The next day at work, I was a bit distracted, haunted. My thinking was only about Tom. If, by increasing the resistance, I was able to travel to say Paris, which was, from my own town some way satisfyingly further off than London, would Tom keep me at the height of my flat, fifteen feet above the ground or would it ignore the curvature of the Earth and put me, on a tangent, up in the air over Paris? I was for some reason certain that Tom must be absolutely autistic and operate on strict Euclidean lines, no spherical geometry would creep

in there. On my way home, it was an early shift, I visited the reference section in the public library. Paris was about 200 miles away and the curvature of the Earth at that distance was about 25,000 feet. So I would be no less than five miles up in the air by the time I arrived there. That meant I would have to travel both 200 miles sideways and 5 miles downwards to have a look at Paris. Of course, to travel that far I would need some more resistors from my friend in his shop, but I didn't want to go back there as I had promised to show him Tom, and that was something I had pledged never to do.

By the time I had arrived home the idea had formed that a much simpler solution would be to angle Tom downwards and reach Paris in one straight motion by "drilling" through the intervening ground. 200 miles times 5280 feet per mile gives just over one million feet, so I would need to angle Tom downwards by 25 in every 1000, or an angle of... I looked up the tangent... 1.432 degrees. Clearly, I had no chance of achieving such accuracy, however, it had given me the idea, of trying exactly that – not to Paris but as far it could reach in the present set-up. The only problem was to secure a delicate Tom at a precarious angle, but with a chair and two leather belts and piles of books and cushions it was finally achieved safely while still giving me room to squat at the end and look in. I had managed to achieve a fair angle of about twenty degrees downwards.

With the vibrant thrill upon me, gently through the valves, I went. Down into my rug and the floorboards and into the space between my floor

and the ceiling below, and then out into the space of the next-door lower flat which I skipped through, not wishing to be seen as a pair of glowing blue eyes from in front or dissected brain tissue behind, into the dark grey air-space beneath that house and finally down into the soil. Out with the torch as everything was black and there, tight in front of my eyes, was a curving cross-section of top-soil, sub-soil and building debris. As I continued down the black top-soil quickly disappeared with the debris and a red clay pipe that came out of nowhere leaving a yellowish mix of stone and gravel and something darker like flint. Because of the doubling of the distance with each notch on the rheostat, I couldn't slide smoothly through the ground at that distance and the image became jumpy and finished on some pale grey stone rubble which, at that angle, must have been about eighty feet below the end house in our row. After the not so spectacular trip downwards, I pulled my head out of the machine and left an eight inch cylinder of flecked, grey stone standing between the electrodes.

For the first time, I had not zeroed the rheostat before quitting and now the rock which was displaced by Tom when I had my head in it, appeared when I withdrew from it. How could that be? I marvelled. I pondered, always staring at the slice of rock. Was it real? Was it really there? But if it was how did my head go there? Finally I had to know. I pushed the tip of my wooden 12 inch ruler into the aura of rock, and, of course, it went in. I sliced it down through the rock and it passed happily into, through and out from the apparently

solid stone without effect. It was only then that I was certain that I was only dealing with the image of the rock, not its actuality. In fact, I could, with trepidation, put my head back between the electrodes, into the stone, and be many feet underground once more.

Backing out of Tom again, I slowly wound down the dial, watching the slice of stone turn to gravel and then to soil. With the slightest shuffling movement of the table, a section of pipe, charging and discharging dirty water invisibly, came into clear view. I was able, with the torch, to see small imperfections, bubbles in the clay of the sliced pipe, and mused over how a drainage engineer would give his eye teeth for such a view, underground, like that. Then I finished it, and came up quickly to avoid the downstairs neighbours. What could an oil prospector do with it? Never missing a deposit, knowing before drilling how many barrels were down there? How about a gold miner, who would fine the mother load, unerringly? How about a uranium hunter, Would a Geiger-counter accurately react in this way? Why not?

(Added note - I have since remembered that a Geiger-counter works by counting particles emitted by the substances not photons, so probably would not register any activity in this way as only the picture is transferred by Tom in this mode not actual particles of substance. However by clicking the switch, tiny samples could be brought to the surface for testing.)

(Extra note – I must have been on a real high when I wrote that. Tom cannot pick any actual

substances from anywhere else, it can only send them out from itself.)

That night, before sleep took me, ideas of placing Tom, not below ground on the earth but in the centre of the sun gripped me. Imagine what a cylinderful of the sun's substance endlessly radiating energy could do. Just through heating water with steam turbines it could power a city, if not a whole country. The sun could easily spare such a small part of its fire and we would have unlimited, free, clean electricity. What further fantasies may have developed and followed were hidden from consciousness as I sank down into a deep sleep.

The next day at work, while still musing and revelling in my own thoughts, a slightly strange, although quietly shocking, incident took place. It was a rainy day, and quite dark in the lounge for the residents, so I decided to turn on the light. I clearly saw and felt my hand move up and out to the light switch by the door, but I couldn't click the switch, just fumbled about on top of it. Then I realised that my arm was, in fact, still by my side, so lifted my hand and clicked the switch as usual. I was benumbed temporarily. It was not an hallucination or a dream, I wasn't that far out of reality. What I saw and felt actually happened. It was too precise in my mind to dismiss it as an error of memory or sight, but I had no simple answer for it. It sounds daft, I know, as I read it, but it did take place exactly as stated. Almost incidentally, I realised the coincidence that it was my left arm, the one that had been “severed” in Tom, two nights before. Anyway,

after that, my concentration on the job for the rest of the shift was that little bit less than it should have been.

PART 4

By the time I had arrived back home it was clear to me what was causing my major distraction. It was not the strange effect on my left arm at all. After my trip digging underground, a new experiment, or perhaps better called new experience, as there was little left of scientific experimentation, was itching to be tried. I couldn't wait to set up St Tom and move the rheostat onto the right-hand spatial contacts, the vertical ones.

At this point I should perhaps make clear that this account has been written up from scribbled notes I made while experimenting. A whole mass of them exists, spread around the flat. Also, not that I feel any need to open up, I'm not in the confessional, or have a need for catharsis, the truth is, by this time at home, I was not faring well. Not eating enough and steadily losing weight. My concentration on, and tolerance of, the everyday life, outside the tiny world of Tom, was totally wayward. I never opened the windows to air or even the curtains any more, just used the electric light, and never gave a thought to attempting to tidy or clean the place.

I set up Tom on top of an office chair, the spinning type with five wheels coming from a central spindle, and rolled it to the centre of the room. With all parts set as desired, I turned off the light and in the blue glow from the valves knelt down in front of the chair and inserted my head into the expanded electrodes. Slowly, I wound the knob up from zero, and the flat began to collapse downwards around me. I jerked my head out quickly, and was back in the room. There was no earthquake. Our instinctive, reflex reactions take some blocking. Rheostat back to zero and face back into Tom. This next time I overruled the temptation to disengage with an enormous effort of will, winding the rheostat up very slowly, trying to click across one of the coiled wires at a time, and the floor and furnishings sank gradually away from me. Down came the ceiling, and then the empty attic flat above and then the tiny roof space above that and I was out, through the tiles and up onto the roof. I stopped there, as if standing or hovering, fighting a sense of vertigo, half-knowing that I could not really slip off the roof, and looked at the red brick houses across the road and down onto the darker red with yellow patches of lichen that was the roof itself and down deeper into the greyness of the road between. It was a miserable day, but everything had a joyous freshness about it. Upwards I turned the rheostat and rose ever more quickly into the air as the houses fell away below me. It was difficult to keep my head still between the contacts, every nerve and fibre of my being was shouting that, like Icarus, at any moment, I would surely plunge down

to my well-deserved death.

I stopped only when reaching the full range of the rheostat which was about 250 feet up, or like standing on the top of an 18 story building, something that didn't exist in our tiny town. From up there everything looked so small - little houses, cute little moving cars like my childhood Dinky toys, little people going about their little, everyday business. By slightly altering my position, I was able to look straight down, at the lichen-streaked tiles of the roofs of the row of houses my flat was in, or I could look far away at the countryside and the winding river crossing it in the distance. But it was all so pretty, so breath-taking, full of sensuous, vibrating colour, subtly dressing its dismal greys on a rainy afternoon. Slowly, I turned the chair, following it round on my knees, marvelling at the spectacularly changing vista as Tom swept my view around into new panoramas. The town-centre sparkled, the Catholic church lit up spectrally with glistening dewdrops, the hill with its perfectly beautiful tiny houses marching up it in lines and sliding down the other side mesmerised me. The bypass passed by in the distance, the little cars' lights shining splendidly on the wet carriageways, and everywhere, overwhelmingly so, were trees. Trees, those huge silent sentinels, were surprisingly dominant, from up there. Clumps of wood in the distance, lining the river, edging the roads and in parks and people's gardens shrouding themselves in a living whisper of green light. Round I went, looking here and there, near and far, over and over again, marvelling at this gloriously novel way of

seeing this fresh and virginal, new world. Until, that is, it suddenly vanished and I was back in my room. How long I had been there I have no idea, it was completely dark by the end. I had gone round so many times, that the shortening mains cable wrapped round and round the central spindle of the chair had eventually pulled the plug from the socket, and Tom had been unceremoniously turned off.

That night the "flying" dreams recurred. Not only flying though, swooping and hovering in the air like a hawk, as well, over a myriad of strange, unknown landscapes. Those places reminded me of nothing I had ever seen before, so where, exactly, such pictures came from I have no idea, perhaps they were just imaginary, although they had such detail...

The next day was a bright and brilliant blue after the rains, and I spent the whole day up in my "tower" as I now called it, looking out over the town and countryside, studying the views at each point of the compass, overwhelmed by the loveliness of it all. Watching the perfectly formed little technicolour townsfolk going about their busy lives reminded me of a happy day spent, in my childhood, in the Camera Obscura at the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

Up the tower felt like hanging in the air in a balloon that needed no attention to keep it in place. As the sun was sinking, I finally backed out of it. Lifting my head from the contacts, the ordinary world seemed dull and lacklustre. In truth the room was a mess and pretty grim with the curtains still

drawn together, but the feeling went beyond that. Tom gave an extra sparkle to the most mundane of objects. I spent the rest of the evening and night stuck in Tom, indoors, sliding in and out of my various electrical appliances and other possessions, using the torch to examine the finer details of their make-up, in action, as they worked. At some point I dragged myself away and went to bed, or rather collapsed on the bed-settee without even opening it.

Still thoughts pestered me. Who was the unknown creator of Tom, the most incredible device ever conceived? Who had put together the now out-of-date collection of valves and wires to achieve such miraculous results with such loving care? George or another? Thinking of George made me think of his wife and her idea to talk to the people in the past. So, as I lay there in the darkness, brain in overdrive, I began to describe in detail Tom. Its materials, its layout and each part, in graphic detail, again and again, sending the thoughts back to its unknown creator. Describing in depth each valve, its pin count, its plates and filaments and position on the raised plate. The snake contacts, glass lid and micro-switched groove. The drawer in the front containing the brass wheel.

On I went, over and over, repeating, adding finer and finer details, long into the coming day, missing my early shift, and on into the evening. Finally, the fit left me and I fell into a profound sleep. Did I get through to somebody? Perhaps only the existence of Tom can answer that, although the corollary questions that that idea throws up go way over my head. I just hide from them.

The next morning, I was back up in the tower watching the comings and goings of people in the street, when I noticed a postman approaching the house. Something was put through the letterbox, so I disconnected myself from Tom and nipped downstairs to have a look. Putting mail for the other flats up on the shelf, I took my own hand-written envelope upstairs. It was from my employers, telling me that whilst my work in the old people's home had been “adequate,” the unexpected and unexplained absences were “unacceptable,” and that therefore, sadly, they would have to “let me go,” to find a more “suitable” occupation. PS. P45 would follow with any monies due at the end of the month.

It didn't worry me excessively, my being sacked. I had some savings and if they ran out I could always use Tom to win some money on the horses at the betting shop in the high street, or on roulette in some Soho casino, or on eight draws on the football pools. I had already calculated that if the doubling of the ranges continued, and I could see no possible reason why it wouldn't, two rheostats in tandem would give a spatial range of nearly 200 miles, while on the temporal contacts they would give me a range of about 6 months. Being able to look 6 months into the future seemed unlikely to leave anyone poor.

I laid back contentedly on the sofa-bed thinking of all the ways I could make enough to keep me afloat or better, with ease, if I only had another rheostat. Then a thought struck me. Supposing I saw a particular horse win the Derby at 8 to 1, and

so put £10,000 on that horse to win. Then this bet would probably affect the odds prior to the race, and then that change of odds could affect the mental composure of all the owners and riders and then that change of composure could conceivably affect the outcome of the race and so maybe my horse wouldn't win after all. Could I alter the future like that? Again, if I recorded the run of numbers on a roulette table one evening and then went there to place bets, would I have to have seen myself there placing the winning bets, or could I push into the time stream after the event and start winning? If I had not been there winning in my "vision" of the future, then maybe in the new alternative the paying out of any large winning bets would upset the croupier which would affect his hand turning the wheel and releasing the ball which would surely affect the slot where the ball ended up, so taking away my "certain" winning bets. Not that I had enough money to throw a horse race or even a roulette game, but perhaps, even so, the football pools would be a safer bet. I couldn't imagine how my bet of correctly "guessing" eight from ten draws would be capable of throwing any football matches.

Then my thoughts became wilder. I was in the future with reversible dimensions and full-length oval plates on the contacts allowing me to appear as a ghostly blue image before the amazed victim. Having supposedly found in an old newspaper information about the death of an influential person in a train accident, I was set to go further back in time to warn them and order that they bury a sack of sovereigns in gratitude at a particular locality and

then, back in the now, dig up the sovereigns, claiming treasure trove and live happily off their value. Only, the ripples from the deliberate changing of the past swept outwards through time causing me, maliciously, not to be born, so I lost everything, only, because I wasn't born, I wasn't there to warn of the accident and it happened anyway, and so I was born and so I did warn the victim and again I wasn't born and then I was and then I wasn't and... so I had to abandon that daft thinking. Perhaps it would be more profitable to use the certain future knowledge to play the stock market with relatively small, steady gains.

Still, the principle of affecting the future between "seeing" it and arriving there in time naturally sounded intriguingly like the experimenter's effect or the uncertainty principle in quantum physics. Was the future as set as the past? Or... could the future be flexible? Come to that, if the future was flexible would that mean that the past really could be flexible as well? After all, that was what George's wife had seemed to feel.

Could I try an experiment? If I planned to look eight minutes into the future, I could look through Tom to see which card I would cut from a pack after shuffling it, say the King of Hearts, and then sit on the floor in front of Tom and, after eight minutes, shuffle and cut and see if it was still the King. I just didn't like it, though. Somehow that didn't appear to allow for the possibility of any difference. It was simply looking into the future. You could even imagine that my prior knowledge of the draw would influence my shuffle subconsciously and would lead

me into cutting the same card anyway. I needed a double-blind experiment, one where the experimenter also doesn't know the outcome, so cannot unwittingly affect the subject. In the end, for me, being both experimenter and subject, that became a triple-blind because I couldn't “see” how to set up such an experiment, anyway.

Perhaps, I could send something into the future and then move Tom, drag the table three feet to the right? Where would the object emerge? At the old position or the new? But no, my mind was ceasing up, going in circles. I knew the answer to that. It would appear at exactly the same point it left from, moving Tom would have no effect, because with Tom the time between would not have existed. That is why the metal fell out, still hot on the table, after I had moved St Tom.

But the idea triggered another thought. How does Tom keep its position relative to the surface of the Earth? Tom is a law unto itself. When pressing the button, it takes itself to be at the extreme corner of a four dimensional grid. Point zero, in four dimensions. Centred between the electrodes, forwards-backwards, right-left, up-down and future-past did not exist only forwards, right, up and future. However, the Earth moves. I ran to my small encyclopaedia, and started scribbling on a piece of notepaper. It moves around the Sun at 66,000 mph, that is eleven hundred miles per minute, and spins, at my latitude, at 670 mph or eleven miles per minute. So in eight minutes that absolute point zero Tom knew should be far away. So, how did it stay centred on that coffee table in

my bed-sit? The answer, of course, was obvious. That was where Tom was, held in place by the Earth's gravity. Yet, an important point seemed to be eluding me there, but whatever it was, I just couldn't grasp it.

Then it came to me. St Tom was literally self-centred. To Tom, the Earth was held in place by it, the Sun revolved around it and the spin of the Earth was the Heavens spinning around it. It was a revival of the medieval view of the Catholic Church that Rome was the centre of the Universe, only replace Rome with St Tom.

Eventually, I got up to make a cup of coffee. My increased "joie de vivre" was quite obvious from the way everything in that dull and dusty room looked so bright and full of energy as I headed lightly for the kitchen. Such materialistic thinking must really turn me on in some way, I mused. At the lounge door something prompted me to look back, and there I was still daydreaming on the sofa-bed. I jumped out of my skin, or, in this case, back into it. In a flash, with a jerk, I was back in my body and the things around me didn't glow in the same way, just my heart was pounding in my chest and temples.

So, amazingly, spending time under Tom had appeared to trigger what they call a psychic projection. I don't think that before that incident I had ever believed in such things, although I wouldn't have called anybody who claimed to have had one a liar. They just weren't in the repertoire of mundane people like me. A little thought, however, convinced me that there must be an organic Tom

secreted in the hidden recesses of our brains. Such had been utilised by “sensitives” throughout history for clairvoyance, projection, precognition and the like.

I took myself slowly out to the kitchen and made a strong cup of coffee. It didn't take me long to calm down and start thinking about what I could do with two rheostats in tandem on the vertical spatial connectors. I imagined travelling straight up for 200 miles, well above the atmosphere, out where the satellites now lived, to watch the turning of the Earth and the storms moving across its face, and the progression of day into night, and the cities lit up in the dark, and the stars standing out clearly in their constellations while the sun was behind the Earth with no atmosphere to distort or dull the picture. All that, in the glorious technicolour of St Tom, could captivate me for a life-time.

I spent the rest of the day up in my tower, watching everyday life unfold beneath me - beneath the vibrant blue sky. Colours were heightened when using Tom, but so were surfaces. All fabrics, I use the term broadly, appeared to be glowing with “life,” which brought out subtle nuances of colour and texture in them, as if they were newly created, like the fresh, young leaves on the trees in spring. It was hypnotically beautiful. The radiations of the sun filled half the sky with rays and bands of brilliance and subtle blends of colour. I couldn't detach until the last of the purple-red light faded from the sky. As I lifted my head out from the copper contacts and my eyes re-focussed upon the area around the brass and mahogany device on the

chair in front of me, the return to my relatively monochrome lounge felt like slipping into a cold puddle of mud.

I should perhaps try to explain the fascination with being up the tower – to try to justify my obsession with it. I have read of an illusion of being in a gigantic bowl when, for example, ascending in a hot-air balloon, as the horizon appears still level with you, yet the ground beneath you falls away. Nothing like this happens when up in the tower. You are in the picture, not just looking at it. There you have both a place and a presence of your own which transcends "real" life as we know it – a seductive immanence. When in Tom, you are more real – more alive – more present, personally woven into that living, vibrational tapestry that surrounds you. Not that the "living-ness" is a form of animism. Rocks or rivers are not independently alive, but everything is part of the greater living whole. Rows of houses are like the feathers on a bird's back, industry like the scales on a reptile, tower blocks must seem as quills on a porcupine reaching up into the sky. Perhaps in the way that the Cubists tried to represent the world. It's a huge addiction. More than that, it must be the raw stuff and the fundamental kick that all other addictions are based upon.

As I rolled back off my knees and sat up away from Tom to reacclimatise, I felt my limbs, all four of them, begin to tingle and become buoyant, as if I was afloat on the sea. They began, from the extremities, to lift away from my physical form, to rise. I was shocked instantly into full consciousness

and immediately the impression stopped. Still needing to gather myself, I went and flopped with my legs over the arm of the armchair and closed my eyes. Again, the rising feeling began. Very gently, and almost imperceptibly now, my hands and feet were lifting away from my body. Arms and legs followed. This time I didn't resist, using Tom had been training me to deaden my reflexes. My trunk began to detach from itself, hips first, rising, to lie out straight in the air, level with my head, and finally my head slid forwards and upwards and away from my physical skull. I opened my eyes then, although there had been no actual eyelids to stop me seeing, but I allowed my vision to reach me. I was free of my body, floating in the middle of the room, face up, about four feet from the ceiling and, therefore, four feet off the floor. I tried to relax my screaming nerves and enjoy the experience, because here, also, could be found that heightened sense of colour and texture I craved. The electricity coursing through my nerves, (physical? or psychical? or both?) wound me up to a pitch somewhere between horror and terror, but I just managed to play possum and hold on to the experience.

I felt somehow that I needed a target, a 'raison d'etre' for that condition, so I thought of the nursing home where I no longer worked. Slowly, my body turned in mid-air like a compass needle until my feet were pointing towards the place and then the walls of my flat, and its house, and the neighbours' houses turned to mist as I slid through them. It felt like this was a slow-motion demonstration for me to

fully appreciate what was happening as, apparently lying on my back, I was taken in that fashion, at a moderate pace, above the level of the streets, all the way, about two miles as the crow flies, to the nursing home. In through the misty walls I travelled, now angling downwards, until I was hovering in the staff room, as if lounging upon a rather elevated chaise longue. Two night staff were there, one playing patience at the table and drinking a cup of tea and the other dozing in an armchair. The one playing patience was a very nice Jamaican lady I knew quite well, and she appeared to sense something strange, because she pulled her colourful cardigan, which she wore on top of her uniform, more tightly around herself and shivered. With that, the reality of what was actually happening became to much for me and I snapped back into my body.

I was quite aware during the trip, at some level just below consciousness, that how it appeared to me was under my sub-conscious control. I could have been, as easily, striding across the countryside on the wind with giant steps or relaxing on my sofa watching it all come to me as if on a three-dimensional cinema screen, just as St Tom had the power to centre the entire heavens on itself. The flying experience had been my choice. Anyway, after that adventure, I slept, peacefully.

The next day saw me up early again and back in my tower. New glories were revealed. It was a variable day with showers whose raindrops glistened in the peeping sunlight, the shadows of clouds scudded across the land and trees swayed and danced wonderfully in the gusting wind. The

little people, alternately sporting short sleeves and frocks or raincoats, umbrellas furled or caught in the gusts, hurried to and fro with greater urgency. It was all a delight to see in the expanded perception. I couldn't disengage myself until the darkness came. When I did, I felt stiff and quite a bit nauseated to be back on “dry land.”

After that I went to bed, and slept. Slept, that is, until about 2 am, when I awoken up by some interference with my sleep. My legs were starting to drift upwards, the rest of me itching to follow. Unable to swallow the knee-jerk reaction to shake it off, my body gave a mighty, spasmodic twitch and normality was resumed. With such a shock awakening I needed a cup of coffee. While the kettle was boiling, I wondered idly how the night sky would appear through Tom at two in the morning. But idle wonderings are dangerous to an inquisitive but addicted mind. So, arriving back in the lounge, I set about positioning the machine at the head of a row of seat cushions laid across the floor.

Switching on, I was able to position myself, on my back, on the cushions with my head between the electrodes. Luckily, with the back of my head on the base-board my eyes came at just the right height to be able to see, St Tom fashion. Fumbling with my left hand above my shoulder, I found the rheostat and began to slowly wind it up. As with the projection, I rose slowly and steadily upwards. Fighting with the urge to pull my head out of the machine, which movement, incidentally, would have stopped both the St Tom vision and a

projection, I laid there jumpily acquiescing to my fate as I wound the knob. The ceiling approached and dissolved, then the flat above, then the roof and I was out into the night sky, hurrying now, towards my station in my "tower," only, this time, looking upwards.

Laid out before me, was the vision I had come for. Even more breathtaking, even more spectacular than I could ever have hoped for. There were millions upon millions of stars, which, with the heightened vision, seemed to consciously possess their surrounding space, not just be laid in it. Colours too numerous to count or even discriminate, in endless patterns and combinations. My psychical eyes, needing to create order from the phantasmagorical chaos, created curving planes and spiralling strings of light and shade that beguiled the mind with their overwhelming beauty. The heavens were crammed full of living pinpoints of energy, each spark flashing and glinting to its own particular rhythm as its pure light battled through our planetary atmosphere.

How long I stayed on the floor like that I have no idea. I think I must have drifted in and out of consciousness while bathed in the glory of the sky. I have, however, a distinct memory of looking down on the Earth while it was still night-time. But, I was not looking at it from the tower but from that dizzy height of 200 miles I had previously imagined. It was a clear night with few clouds and little haze, and there below me were the cities and towns of Britain and Europe, like the most gigantic, complex, cross-stitch pattern laid out in the finest silver and

gold thread. I stared, amazed, drinking in this new breathtaking spectacle, marvelling at the detail in the delicate tracery spread out below me, even recognising some of the glowing webs that marked the major centres of human life.

I have no memory of how I left the stars, I think I succumbed to their glory and slept up there with them. Nor any memory of leaving the Earth, the view of which must have been achieved by psychic projection as it was impossible from my position on the floor, flat on my back, and using only one rheostat. When I awoke, I was back in my body in bed, or rather on top as the covers were on the floor, again feeling stiff and cold. Tom had been left out but was unplugged. My only thought at that time was this: Where had the Moon been? I had looked up at the stars and then down at the Earth but had not seen the Moon. But then it struck me as obvious, as I realised, that it must have been behind the Earth with the Sun or at least out to the side.

Trying to work off the cold and stiffness, I dressed a bit more and deciding it was time I ate something, put on toast and coffee. The toast was buttered with some cheese sat next to the mug of hot, sweet, black coffee before the urge to get back up the tower gripped me. Leaving the food on the kitchen table, I hurried back into the lounge and set up St Tom on the chair, quickly, despite the shaking of my hands, and straight up into the tower I went.

It was a nice day, early morning, green and fresh, as I swivelled round from scene to scene, drinking in the vistas splayed out before me. As I looked in the distance, beyond the bypass busy with

commuters, I caught sight of the Moon as it drifted palely upwards some way above the rising sun. There. That was what had drawn me back into the tower. The crescent Moon, lying almost on its back, in pastel resplendence in the brightening sky. I longed to be there. I ached for it, I wanted to possess it. I wanted it to be mine.

No sooner had that crazy urge or whim or whatever-it-was gripped me than it consumed my mind. I wanted to travel to the Moon, and drink in the beauty of the Earth from there. Instantly, I was off, rising perpendicularly through the ceiling and roof. Straight out of my shaking body, I felt myself rise, until passing the height of my tower, I picked up my psychic self and vision from there and inclined towards the rising moon. The journey wasn't instantaneous, although I believe it could have been. Up and up I went, gathering speed, the fine blue colour steadily receding, going out of the sky, leaving the acknowledged biosphere far behind, although up there <u>everything</u> was alive, the stars glowed with mildly amused, personified animation, the planets and satellites pulsed out waves of living energy, seeming to greet me as I rose up to join them. Galaxies, gas clouds, asteroids, comets – all were alive and in constant intercommunication. Then, following the rising moon, from my elevated point in the sky, the sun rose, large, radiant and resplendent possessing half the sky. Moon and stars were momentarily obliterated by the overwhelming power of that light, although my psychic sight quickly accommodated to the initial overload.

Then my onward rush started to slow, but

frustratingly not by nearing the Moon, which was still quite some distance ahead. In front of me, a yellow point began to swell strangely, becoming pencilled in in detail as it grew. Dressed in a saffron robe, sat officiously in the lotus position, just floating there out in empty space, was an aged, white-moustached, oriental man. He appeared to be looking in my direction, but never spoke, only threw his thought at me, and I understood.

"Go no further," he urged me, apparently in English, "you are untrained and in the gravest of danger. Moderation is the middle of the Noble, Eight-fold Path. Moderation in all things."

Moderation! On the way to the moon? I don't believe that there was any force in the universe that could have stopped me at that point. As I prepared to answer him to that effect, my motion recommenced and he wavered, faded and disappeared as I passed through him and beyond.

I couldn't have held myself now, even if I had so wanted. I was totally consumed by desire. It would take more than some arcane admonition to put the brakes on such an adventure. On I travelled, speeding more and more, until the heavily shaded disc of the moon filled my view. My impetus took me towards the boundary between day and night. Mountains, plains and countless craters of varying sizes glowed in a pale, spectral, monochrome grey edged in deepest violet-tinted charcoal.

So the fabled astral projection was becoming an accomplishment of mine. That paralysing fear, which had naturally stopped it, being overcome not

by an increase in my bravery but, paradoxically, by an increase in disinterestedness in my personal safety. I descended to the surface without the slightest bump and turned to look back at the Earth, which was nearly full. Such a sight was beyond words, awe-inspiring, humbling. I stayed a long time, in constant motion, bounding lightly from light to shadow and back, examining the fluffy surface of our splendid satellite, the Moon. Always contentedly regarding the Earth, that most beautiful, sapphire sphere, and watching the spectacularly rising edge of that ball of living flame we call, in our ignorance, merely the Sun.

Long before I was sated, something started tugging at me, insistently. It was pulling at my solar plexus, clawing at my vitals, trying to drag me away. I fought with it, resisted it for all I was worth, until, as if losing my footing on the Moon, I tripped and tumbled and twisted and fell all the way back down to Earth in little more than an instant.

For what?

There are no more notes to copy. I am writing this out direct. I am back, now, in my body - that traitorous heap of sinews and muscles and bones that failed to properly support me. I am the Mind. I am supposed to be the active principal. This fleshly sheath is my servant. How does it dare to try to override my desires? My commands? Cold and stiff and hungry and thirsty, it may have been. In truth, I can hardly stand and can't stop shivering and shaking violently. But my will is the paramount force, here. Its desire is supreme.

I crawled to the kitchen and drank water straight from the tap, then took in the cold, sweet, black coffee I had abandoned a lifetime ago. I nibbled a little dried cheese and toast. As a result, my blood is flowing again. Life is starting to come back into my limbs. The involuntary shakes and the pins-and-needles may even be easing. When the pounding in my chest and temples passes I'll be able to continue.

I see now what Shakespeare meant when Hamlet says, “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space.” All expansion is achieved through limitation. A painter, by concentrating on his two-dimensional canvas, opens our eyes to a greater three-dimensional world. The sculptor, by using inanimate matter, reveals to us the livingness of beings. A composer, by limiting his work to the twelve notes of the keyboard, enters deeper into the full expanse of harmonic sound. A scientist, through the scientific method, studies a few variables to open our minds to the infinite variations of reality. Darwin, by concentrating his attention on the Galapagos Islands was able to identify the mechanism of survival of the fittest, which, when applied to the world at large gave us “The Origin of Species.” Religion, by concentrating our gaze on fewer essentials, opens us up to the deeper realities of life. A mother, by concentrating on her child, magnifies her understanding of the true realities of being human. Forever, expansion is only achieved through limitation.

Mars next, I think, the red planet, our closest neighbour. Then the giant Jupiter, and ringed

Saturn and all their moons. And Venus - I almost forgot Venus and Mercury.

But to enter and investigate that enchanting Red Spot, to fly through those diaphanous rings, to land on one of their Earth-like moons... to swim in their frozen oceans... then Alpha Centauri... the spiral of Andromeda...

EPILOGUE

Unfortunately, we have to abandon the story of our unnamed hero at this point, because he never wrote anything else. He was eventually discovered to be deceased by the police, who had been alerted by the complaints of neighbours. At the inquest it was declared that he had been dead for approximately two weeks when he was found, and via the autopsy that he had died of heart failure exacerbated by emaciation and possibly caffeine poisoning. Upon the whereabouts of his psychic body at the time when the silver cord that linked it to his physical parted, we can only idly speculate. As for where he is now...

Also, the whereabouts of the machine he called St Tom, after his death, although referred to in court papers was never determined. The original, detailed experimental notes, to which he refers, were also never recovered. The police, who had sealed off the flat following the discovery of the body, had no

explanation for this. The idea was spread around the enquiry anonymously that the whole thing was a fantasy-gone-wrong, dreamed up by his fevered and diseased imagination after the disappointment of losing his job. This became the official view and the verdict returned was “Death by Misadventure.”

However, it was whispered about, later, between the neighbours, that when the police finally allowed removers to clear out his flat, they found quite a few discs of cardboard apparently cut from a cornflakes packet and many pieces of shattered glass tucked under the rug in front of the sealed-up fireplace.

ps. Let us not think of our hero as a detached entity roaming in the vastness. Just as Nature abhors a vacuum, it also abhors isolation. Content will always find a container. A disembodied spirit will find a physical vehicle. When one door closes behind, another appears before - “knock and it shall be opened unto you.” Somewhere out there our hero has found a new home.

LIFE FOUR

MEGATOM

PROLOGUE

Jimbo woke with a scream. It was the dream again. Yet again he was in the cave, the tomb. On the stone pedestal that dominated the small, enclosed, almost spherical space was the female figure draped in white. To one side was the short

tunnel that constituted the entrance and only exit and Jimbo stood at the foot of the pedestal looking longingly at the low moon hanging in the night sky which showed through this solitary aperture.

As he moved towards the tunnel to leave, the woman on the pedestal began to writhe and groan in pain, arching her back, and a circular stone, outside, began to roll across the opening of the tunnel. Jimbo just couldn't bear either that writhing or groaning, they tore at his innards, or the thought of being enclosed, so he withdrew to his place at the foot of the pedestal. The woman settled down with a soft moan and the stone rolled quietly back out of view. He waited indefinitely. Then he tried again, pushing on this time, while the woman's groans turned to screams as the pain turned to agony, the writhing to thrashing around violently and the rolling stone almost completely occluded the opening. In the encroaching blackness, he had no choice but to back off again and wait for matters to resettle themselves.

Slowly now, imperceptibly, he tried to ease his way out. Making small, he hoped undetectable movements he inched towards the opening. The woman moaned quietly then gasped fearfully twitching her arms under the moonlit drapes, the stone grated menacingly in its socket and Jimbo, nerves shattered, screamed himself awake.

It was daytime. Jimbo washed and dressed quickly. He needed to get out. He needed some fresh air and to reconnect with the real world outside. Not to talk to anyone, though. Jimbo didn't talk much since the unexpected loss of his

mother. Then again, he didn't, actually, talk much before the loss of his mother. He would go to the coffee-shop.

PART 1

"We all know something of what happened. It's presence is all around us, on the land, in the portals and as stories and histories, half-dreamt and half-true, repeated, extended and rewritten to suit the mood or the interests of the teller. We cannot know the "real" truth, it is gone without a trace, hidden within the realms of the multi-dimensional space we occupy.

"How it actually was, to live without MegaTom, we can never imagine. Many of us living in corners of our Space/Time/Mind continuum attempt to go native, to live as if MegaTom didn't exist at all, but, of course, we are only fooling ourselves. The very spaces we inhabit were created within MegaTom by those unknown people, who constructed the whole framework for it. We can, however, use their reported experiences to try to conjure up a picture of life before MegaTom.

"Once upon a time, when or how exactly that was we do not know, people lived in an increasingly technological world, with all the stresses of being packed on top of one another, without any sense of

release. They had to stay in the stress, because that was the place where things happened. They had to find their own energy sources to power everything. Move anything they wanted moved by physical effort, manually or by machine. Food, materials and finished goods all had to be transported by powered vehicles and even the people themselves had to be moved around by some kind of vehicles.

"As the tensions grew, the hotspots which had been created as focal points for the lands around them, entered into aggressive arguments against neighbouring hotspots over agricultural or mineralogical land disputes leading to open hostilities. In this way a great deal of the energy and material created by these societies appears to have been used in fighting the "enemy." They laboured under two opposing tendencies, being strongly gregarious they piled themselves upon each other, yet having fierce territoriality they endlessly squabbled amongst themselves. Even so, the people of those times, were not so very different to us and were born, lived and died under such a system for generations.

"But then, according to the myths that have come down to us, one day, somebody invented the first Tom. Tom meaning (T)ransmitter (o)f (m)atter. Life being as aggressive as it was in those days, it was quickly taken up by the military, the fighters, and used as a weapon against the enemies of that group.

"Initially, they were used crudely, just spatially, to destroy enemy weapons, and kill the enemy leaders, themselves. Then the various allies and enemies,

learning of the existence of a Tom in one area, learnt how to make their own, until hundreds were zapping around the world, killing, destroying, watching and being used to listen in on vital enemy information. Gradually, the stockpiled weapons were being depleted, the belligerent leaders were ending up dead, and a new craftier generation of leaders came into power that did not intend to be seen by the enemy Toms used as spying devices or to be killed by one used as a weapon. More and more Toms came into being, whole banks of them being used to comb through the enemy territory, looking for the new leaders, secret information or other notable targets to destroy.

"Then somebody discovered how to use the temporal potential that these individual Toms possessed. Armed with this new knowledge, all the fighting groups started looking back in time and killing off their enemies in the past, before they could become a problem, or even be aware that they were destined to become one. This set up stresses in the Space/Time/Mind continuum as various adjoining plaques of the continuum were thrown into different time-lines and the Unified Field which contains the whole spark of the Total Now was stretched and twisted in ways that had never happened to it before. The planet reacted under this abuse of its integrity and various seismic events began to release the pent up energy created by the shifting of the plaques. Buildings were demolished by earthquakes and even more stress entered the people. This didn't stop the fighting, however, which continued going deeper and deeper back into

time, killing and destroying under the will and whim of fearful and deranged leaders.

“All this, is classed as Phase One. It is assumed that there was no Unified World Government at that time. As we have seen, small self-governing groups which called themselves cities or states, with a technological centre and agricultural fringes, existed all over the world. Exchange of goods and services took place between states, and between individuals within each state, through some kind of bartering system. The integrity of each state was maintained by a percentage of its population and energy supply being set aside for warfare, (I know it sounds crazy, but we are pretty sure it's true) and through various levels of agreements between states.

“Something we need to be clear on here, and a point that many will not have realised, is that the Toms of those days did not need a second machine to project into, they could fling matter out from themselves to another position in space or time without the need for the receiving equipment that MegaTom uses. When used as spying tools they could gather information from any place in time or space without having to make any physical contact with that other place, although eventually some sensitive devices were rumoured to be able to pick out their presence.

“So as Phase One progressed, more and more leaders and state buildings and weapons depots were obliterated by either enemy forces or the violently reacting planet until no high-ranking officer was left alive and no large building was left standing. Then the Toms were turned on each other

as they were the final source of military power in each state. So the Toms plus operators were separated from each other and hidden, working from home. But here, very quickly, and universally, the operators of the Toms having seen that the potential in such devices went far beyond the military usage, began stealing them and hiding them away, pretending they had been destroyed. Thousands were been created by this point, and more and more were taken and each secreted somewhere well out of sight, and this was the beginning of Phase Two.

"All over the Earth there were individuals with a Tom. How they used them to prosper in a barter-driven system we don't really know, but jealousies and rivalries powered by the collapsing state control meant that very soon, as before, the Toms were used to resolve petty squabbles in the only certain way - by attack - by destroying their opponent's assets, and if that didn't work, by killing the opponents themselves. Phase One was repeated on a smaller scale all over the globe. Now the enemies were their neighbours. They started to go back in time to beat the enemy to the punch, sometimes even before he was born, attacking his parents, and the plaques of the continuum were stressed right down to the individual level. People were born again who didn't know anything about these things when previously they had been prime movers in the wars. The spark of the Total Now was being forced to move sideways to accommodate the rewriting of so many individual histories and the ground had a perpetual trembling.

“All through these Phases, around each state, the workers on the land continued their business of feeding the people, unabashed by war or civil unrest, with that dogged perseverance on which their natures were centred. Meanwhile, individuals were born, lived, fell out with a rival, were killed, were unborn or were reborn with other lives in a ploughing up of the population that matched in form the ploughing of the outlying fields. Finally, with people having learned to keep away from each other, only possible because of the vast reduction in the population caused by Phases One and Two, the world entered into Phase Three.

“By Phase Three, many, many people, had a Tom, and now something that is hard to understand began to take place. Like a wave it passed through the people, catching them one by one, in their isolation. They felt the need to be more educated, more technologically aware, if they were to prosper in this newly collapsing/emerging world. They studied books, of which they had many in those days, attended seminars, listened to talks (like this one), in order to lift themselves into a position of knowledge over their fellows. When it didn't work, as was usually the case, because they were too old to absorb the new information quickly enough, they would project themselves back in time, using the temporal controls of the Toms, to try to teach their own younger selves what they felt they themselves should have known at that age.

Immediately, of course, they entered into a new future path, because they themselves had never, at that age, been visited by their future selves, and the

plaques of the continuum began rattling again, but now on an intra-personal level.

"Outcomes were varied. Some youngsters did learn and advanced further in life. Some teamed up with their future selves as if they were their parents. Others refused and fought with their much older future selves and usually, because of their youth, won. Through fear, most people were still belligerent then, and an older version of yourself is not any different to an unknown stranger suddenly confronting you, and many of the returning "oldies" were simply killed. So the micro-plaques of the Space/Time/Mind continuum were shifted again, and there were minor seismic events all over the world, as a constant background rumbling, as the shifting micro-plaques tried to heal their rifts and coalesce.

"At the end of the three phases the world population had been decimated. Technology had enabled the innate aggression of Mankind to rise up and swallow Man, himself. It was done, state by state, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, family member by family member, until each man frightened and fragmented turned on himself. The remaining people were suspicious of others and living in isolation. Most of them were hiding some form of Tom, that had been passed around during the various levels of combat. We have no numbers to support this picture of events, either before the wars or after but these facts come from many unconfirmed sources and ring true. Any surviving building over two stories had been demolished by the writhing of the planetary surface as it tried to

slough off its outmoded skin of ill-fitting plaques.

"In the background, during Phase Three, while most people were trying various ways to kill themselves, a high level committee was being convened periodically, urgently, of leaders from all over the world. Its one goal was to use their technology to bring man out of this impasse, this deathly, downward spiral. Agreements were made and all efforts turned towards the detailed planning and construction of MegaTom, the saviour of mankind.

"The scope was colossal – all encompassing. A social experiment to save Mankind, and the whole world participated, willingly and enthusiastically, to break free from the stranglehold of Phase Three.

"The power source was considered first. Vast amounts of energy would be needed to drive the scheme. This turned out to be easier than imagined. Many Toms were set to "spy" on the surface of the sun. The energy of the sun they brought to Earth was then used to create electricity. (How I do not know.) Such a system would have no end, as the sun would have no end.

"Then the surface of the Earth was mapped into a square grid of one mile in each direction. Points of intersection on the grid were used as positions for the new MegaTom ports, some being adjusted slightly and some being left out, so that no point was sited anywhere but on solid ground. From any point on the Earth's surface a MegaTom port would be at most a mile away. We all know the distinctive blue lights that sit above them and accept them as a

natural feature of the world like the rivers or grass.

"Considering the time range of the scheme, it was decided to include a period of about thirty thousand years divisible by seconds giving one million million different points in time. These are all accessible from the Absolute Controls on the top of the board that none of us ever bother with. The Relative Controls allowing movements in minutes, hours, days, months and years from the present is more than enough for most of us.

"Then they planned the layout of an individual port, so that all ports would be identical. It was here that the planners excelled themselves. What seems natural to us, living within MegaTom, was a brainwave to them, as they formed and developed it between themselves. Each port would be square in plan, divided into four triangular booths with the cardinal points serving as the four doorways. (I know you know all this but I include it for completeness.) The southern booth was the port proper for space/time travel around MegaTom, the western booth was for food and drink, the northern for clothing and equipment and the eastern for medical attention.

"The necessary work to produce the required sixty million MegaTom ports using duplicators consumed the industry of the world. However, as you may not know, a duplicator is a specialist Tom that brings a copy of an object from itself into the world, without upsetting the original, so that there are two of them, then three, then four etc. The biggest job was positioning so many ports around the world with giant modified Toms ready for the

time that was to be designated as ZeroSecond.

“When all ports were solidly based in position and each tested true, the network was switched on and ZeroSecond became second one, then second two on the Absolute Controls and off we went. Incidently, back then, there were time zones, to keep the height of the sun near to twelve o'clock, noon, at each point on Earth, but these are absent in MegaTom, all is one time. If we leave from here at dawn and travel to the other side of the world, we will need to add or subtract 12 hours to arrive at dawn there. Also as we know, clocks are an unnecessary rarity now, just keepsakes, reminders of a forgotten past.

Along with this SwitchOn, all old Toms possessed by anybody inside MegaTom were destroyed, (I don't know how they discovered them all) and a census of individuals within the scheme gave a total world tally of twenty thousand million people. I am not sure how accurate this tally was, because by taking an average life expectancy of 75 years you would imagine 400 discrete generations in 30,000 years. If one person occupies the area around each of the 60,000,000 MegaTom ports at any time, there would be 24,000,000,000 people all together, which sounds suspiciously close to the supposed census result of 20,000,000,000.

“And here we are. We all live quite separate lives, although family groups exist. We come together rarely, like in this event. We spend our days doing whatever we please. Some people like to cook, so they cook for others as well. Some like to sew, so they become tailors, taking in or letting

out the clothes provided by MegaTom or adding embellishments. Some like to build, and build houses around the place, anywhere they may be asked to or just feel like. Others enjoy to farm and have small fields and a few animals. Some potter around doing odd jobs as needed. We keep collections of just about anything that is collectable and watch the sunrise and the sunset, and are content. Within our social experiment we appear only to suffer from a complete lack of want.

"If we become bored in one place or with one climate, we can flip to another using the portals of MegaTom. If we become hungry or thirsty, we can get the food or drink of the region from a small farm or any standardised food or drink we desire from MegaTom. If we feel like new clothes, we can get them in size, shape and colour to suit from MegaTom and have them altered by the local tailor if we want to feel different. If we feel ill, we are diagnosed and given the necessary medication by MegaTom, but if more drastic measures are required we are taken into the system through MegaTom's medical portal and returned healed. All our needs are catered for. We are living the dream of thousands of generations of many millions of people who had to scrape out an unsatisfactory existence from the face of the Earth, under the constant threat from weather, neighbours, enemies, pestilence and disease. The system we live under is the crowning achievement of Mankind. Thirty thousand years of peace and prosperity for the entire planet.

"It used to be that there were cities, huge

conglomerates of houses and factories, where things were made, joined by the specially built paths, they called roads, that carried people and goods endlessly to and fro between them. We have none of these things. Only portals and grass and trees. We don't need cities now, but even if we did, people are afraid to congregate like that after the Three Phases. We have never needed to recreate the man-made roads destroyed long ago by the quaking ground, because all travel is done through MegaTom. All things are comfortably separate. Not that there are not some places where a few tailors or cobblers or clocksmiths or nurses may gather (we all know a few) to be easily reached by the nearest portal.

"All the goods from MegaTom are appropriate. If we port to a mountainous region where it is cold, the clothes provided will be fit for the climate. If we port to a nice warm beach, again they will match the prevailing conditions. Foods can be of the region or of the standard set. It is said, that if I order a beef steak with trimmings, a duplicator will take a copy from the Standard Beef Steak and send me that. That is why all the food is of the same high quality. There is one set of Standards which can be infinitely copied, and so feed everybody, endlessly. How this works, where, or when even, the Standards are kept, I don't know.

"Now, when we come to the question of where or when, there are other things nobody seems to know. Where is the main power supply for the grid of MegaTom? Is it inside MegaTom or outside? Where are the doctors or machines who assess us in

the healing portals? Again, are they inside MegaTom or on the outside? How and where are the clothes measured and copied from Standards and sent to the clothing portals? Who does this? Are they with us on the inside or watching us from the outside? By all this, I think I mean – are we self-contained? - or are we being manipulated and observed by others outside this experiment? Is there an outside? Is there a sideways developmental arm in time where the Constructors live? Or, perhaps, this is all there is, everything was put into MegaTom. Perhaps there is an island in some forgotten corner of the world at some forgotten time from where the engineers, medics, clothiers, and administrators run the whole thing – sat in rows, waiting for a request from a portal somewhere, somewhen.

"The truth is that around here, at least, there is not very much demand on the portals of MegaTom, some food occasionally, the odd piece of clothing. It would be unimaginable to think of a queue outside one. The quick trip to see a waterfall or feel the desert sun above us is about all we have left in us of curiosity and that is pretty well burnt out by the time we reach puberty. We have plenty to surfeit and it has jaded our appetite as well as that killer instinct that is supposed to dwell within each of us. This is Paradise on Earth, realised and made concrete. We, each of us, live it day-by-day as commonplace, knowing no other form of life."

Jimbo had heard enough. He began to move away from the speaker on the lectern, who appeared to be running out of steam. He had had some

interesting points though. It was true that life proceeded at a very sedate pace. In the course of a week what exactly did Jimbo do? Go to the portal to pick up some food, take his washing to the cleaners and help the cleaning lady clear up his cabin, as long as he didn't get in her way. It wasn't a very inspiring week. Walking when it was nice, reading when it wasn't and pottering about in between, but then what else was there?

He wasn't one of those people with a driving desire to do something, like the cleaning lady. She cleaned with a passion. The target object would end up polished or else. Or the cleaners who took real delight in seeing other peoples laundry turning out clean and fresh and neatly folded. This was their self-imposed purpose, this was the highest pleasure for them. Jimbo had nothing. It was like he was on holiday from his job, only the holiday never stopped, and the job was long lost from memory.

Then there was that speaker. He could still just hear him as he rambled on about conditions in the world. He had a passion for telling things to the ear of anyone who would stop and listen. Even if it was rubbish he was spouting, he was drawn to do it by some kind of desire, a need, a real passion for it. Where was Jimbo's desire? His need? His passion?

Nothing had stirred Jimbo since his mother walked into a diagnostic port and never returned. He had been thirteen, then. Already well able to use the facilities as needed, he had not been having much contact with his mother, but it was still a shock. He had waited at the port for her to re-appear, although she should have been returned the

second after she had disappeared, but she never came back.

Now he had been stirred up again by this speaker. Most of what the man had said he already knew, but the way in which he put the facts was new. Where was the system run from? It didn't feel like being inside a system at all, it felt natural enough, but the MegaTom ports that facilitated his apparently easy life must have come from somewhere, and as the man had said, must be run from somewhere. Who had diagnosed his mother? Who had decided that she could not be returned and kept her with them? Where were these people?

Jimbo entered the nearest port, the light was blue, meaning available, and dialled up six North and four West on the local controls and pressed the big, red button, and walked out in the coffee shop area where the chalets were facing each other around a circular paved area covered with lightweight tables and chairs. Few people were around, mostly singles sipping coffee and reading or gazing into space, some in twos playing cards or dominoes and some couples courting. Jimbo knew he would have to go courting some day, his mother had told him so, but Jimbo had just blushed. He walked to his favourite shop and took a cup, thanking the proprietor, whose sole joy in life was supplying coffee to his customers, and sat down to think.

Somebody or something had diagnosed his mother when she walked into the medical booth of MegaTom. She had needed specialist care, because she had been ported from there, but that medical care had obviously failed, because she wasn't sent

back again the next second. So she must have died in their care. But whose care? Where did she go? As the speaker had questioned, was it inside the grid or outside?

Jimbo sipped some more coffee. Then again what did it matter as long as somebody was looking after them? Even so, 30,000 years worth of a whole planet must take some looking after. When he asked for a coffee, he didn't have to ask, but anyway, when he asked for coffee the proprietor gave it to him. When in the spring he dialled up a new light blue suit, it came out of the slot, in his size. Who sent him that? Where did it come from? In a world with sixty million MegaTom ports, how many would be working at any one time? Surely many. So there must be many people working at the other end of the booths, taking the measurements, having the right size, style and colour selected and sending them back to the booth after the obligatory one second delay.

“Hello,” came a voice at his shoulder, “didn't I see you listening to the Preacher, earlier on?”

Without waiting for an answer, the man continued. “What he really missed out altogether was the point in time where they positioned the big SwitchOn. Did they set ZeroSecond back 30,000 years to arrive at The Wall in their current time and thereby send the world into a side branch in time, or did they set it for their own time so that we would carry on into their future?”

Jimbo was confused. “What's 'The Wall'?” he asked, feeling out of his depth.

“The Wall is the other end from ZeroSecond. If you set the Absolute Time to ZeroSecond, that is 000,000,000,000, when you press the red button you go back in time as far as possible, but the flow of time, as you arrive there, keeps you second by second in MegaTom's space as the seconds count up, but if you set the Absolute Time to 999,999,999,999, about 31,000 years after ZeroSecond and as far forward in time as you can go, then the very next second you are out of MegaTom's range and so over the wall and gone! Lost to MegaTom, forever. Anyway, I tend to think that they positioned us in their future,” he continued, undeterred by Jimbo's confused look, “because Mankind was gregarious and lived in cities in the past, so if they had sent ZeroSecond back into the past the people here would have still been gregarious as well. However, as we all know, we are solitary beings, much more like the people living after those three phases of war, the Preacher talked about. No, no, I am quite sure, we come directly from them, we are their children, and are living in their future...” He had introverted and walked off, still muttering, into his own private world.

This was all news to Jimbo, who had never thought about such things before, and he went to the proprietor and took a second cup of coffee, which was almost unprecedented for him. As he sat down he marvelled at the idea of a Wall in the far future where, if you crossed it, you were lost for ever to this world. It sounded more like dying to him. His mother died, and she was lost to this world forever.

True, he could go back in time and find her still living, with himself there as a child, but that would only scare her, and upset his younger self, and set him off on another branch of time, because he never saw himself older on this branch where he is living at this moment. Who knows what could happen in that other branch. Better to go right back to ZeroSecond, well away from his own timeline, and have a look around there, after all that was what his dad was supposed to have done, gone back to ZeroSecond to search for old books. If Jimbo followed, perhaps he would find his father there and ask him to come back home, and that would change the past, because he had not returned, and then perhaps in the new future his mother would not start coughing up blood into her handkerchief, and so they could all be together as a family again.

Such a proposed trip was for the sedentary Jimbo a revolutionary thought that had managed to sneak past his conscious valves. A journey back to the beginning of time, well, the beginning of MegaTom time, anyway. He sipped at the coffee to slow himself down and ease the excitement that was in danger of overwhelming him. His mother would have told him that he needed to prepare properly for such a trip. However, all he really needed was a copy of his absolute port numbers so that he could return when ready, all necessary clothing and food could be found in any port there.

In his repressed way, Jimbo took the empty cups back to the café proprietor and borrowed a pen from him. At the port he carefully copied both absolute numbers onto his left forearm, 641,347,693,228 and

333,682,689,027. He was playing a part, now, the "as if" part, while watching himself as he walked back and returned the pen with thanks. ZeroSecond indeed. His own father had been lost to ZeroSecond trying to find interesting books that had been hidden away from the general destruction. That's what his mother had told him, anyway, and his mother never lied. Father had said something pompous as he was leaving.

"There is no absolute Truth within the three dimensions of Mind. Act! Before the plaques can coalesce, and lock you down."

Forget it. Back to the port again to go home and to bed after so much atypical agitation and activity. Yet, as he reached to dial in his home port on the local settings, his arm usurped and outraged him by stretching up beyond that and putting the twelve zeros of ZeroSecond on the Absolute Counter. Before he could wake up and over-ride the renegade action, he had pressed the red button.

PART 2

As Jimbo stepped out of the port all was silent. Around him the world looked a bit messier, a bit more used and abused than at the time he had spent his life in, but there was no sign of life. In every direction lay emptiness, abandoned fields. No

people, no animals – not even insects. A dirt track had once passed by.

Looking back inside the port he saw a paper on the notice board saying that a local population centre was at South 4, East 6. So he put these coordinates into the local controls and pressed the button... and emerged in the centre of the remnants of a town. Broken down shops and houses were on all sides. Hardly anything remained standing, but this was counting away from ZeroSecond, it shouldn't, perhaps, have been wrecked like this, with no living soul in sight.

Inside the port a sign said “Major population centre – South 15, West 8.” So he dialled it... and stepped out into the streets of a wrecked city. On the corner opposite was a small gathering, listening to a speaker who was stood on a low wall. Jimbo sauntered over to listen.

“We are all from other times, obviously, as nobody and nothing is left alive from these times in this area. We have been studying what took place here, and continues to take place in the future, and I want to make this plain to you all, so that you can take the news back to your own times and warn others.

“At some point in our Space/Time/Mind continuum, just before the establishment of MegaTom, a developing foetus in its mother's womb was badly affected by something, probably a wrongly used, unlicensed Tom, or the clashing of electronic flows from two different Toms, causing major damage to its digestive tract, a complete

destruction of all villi with a smoothing of the gut wall, and degenerative processes in the corresponding nervous system and brain. (This information comes from the doctors involved in the case.)

"As the foetus approached full term, it began to claw its way out of its mother, first through the egg sack (her waters broke, they brought her a wheelchair), then the womb (she began to haemorrhage, they put her on a bed,) and then her abdomen (she was screaming, they sedated, then anaesthetised her) in a self-performed caesarian operation, performed, however, by the baby, not the mother. When they took the baby away from the mother it had bitten through its umbilical cord, it had teeth from that age, and was sucking the blood from it. The mother was cleaned up, stitched up and survived the ordeal - damaged but alive. She, understandably, being advised to have nothing whatsoever to do with it, left the baby to be whisked off to a sanatorium, from whence it was not expected to see the light of day again.

"However it happened, among the usual deaths from assorted abnormalities at the sanatorium, the baby grew. Its growth was far quicker than normal, apparently, due to its unique internal wiring and diet. Facts have come to us that it had completely refused milk, and fed exclusively on blood. Any animal's blood would do, although always mammalian. It appears that with the developmental damage to his intestines, the baby was a boy, the only food he could take was blood, which was passed, after limited digestion, directly through his

gut wall and into his blood stream. He had to parasitise on other animals to feed himself, or, as it was at the time, the doctors had to use slaughterhouse blood to feed him.

"Then a baby was found very ill, in a neighbouring cot, with partial blood loss from injuries. "He" was found on the floor in the corner, hiding under a desk at the nurses station, with his mouth and front covered in dried blood. He was cowering back against the wall, but not from them, from the sunlight that was entering the room through the open door.

"After that, he entered a more secure room. The blinds were kept drawn, and at least two people had to be in attendance together, never one on their own. He was fed on blood from beef and they called him Vlad, for reasons that were obvious to most in those days.

"Yes, I understand that you all come from future times, so I will explain. Before MegaTom the world was awash with intercommunications. Books, newspapers, radio and television all bombarded the hapless people of the time with meaningless information about just about everything. One of the forms this took was the novel, made-up stories about anything one could imagine and then a bit more on top. One of the most famous novels made into many feature films, that is, moving pictures telling the stories for people who couldn't read, was "Dracula," about a vampire that drank his victim's blood, but had to avoid the sunlight. This vampire was supposedly based on a true character from history called Vlad, who, however, was not a

vampire. Hence the little blood-sucking boy who couldn't bear the sunlight was called Vlad.

"In his isolation he received a rudimentary education and lots of blood. To calm him down from the frenzies or mania he would enter into around the times of the full-moon, whether for better or worse, the doctors in charge of him had the idea to give him out-of-date for transfusions, human blood. That worked, and he was kept quiescent with three doses a month during the full-moon and ox blood otherwise. However, news of this practice was leaked out, and public outrage, whipped up by the nosey media of the time, brought it to an end. He was eleven, looking a skinny eighteen, when the whole network of doctors and nurses about him was forced to change because of the bad publicity. For ten weeks he was in an almost constant rage, before falling silent and morose and withdrawn.

"With that, everybody concerned in the case could breathe a sigh of relief, until two weeks later he was gone. During the nights, when alone, he had been digging into the wall under the barred window, hidden behind his tiny desk, where a patch of rising damp had softened the brickwork. Bits of brick and mortar were found buried at the bottom of his toy-box and in the pockets and folds of his clothes in the cupboard that served as a wardrobe and in three pillowcases under the bottom end of his mattress. The final night, the night of the full moon, he had moved the desk well away and kicked out the softened outer layer of bricks, wriggled through the hole, crossed the lawn, climbed the eight-foot wall at the back using a convenient tree and was gone.

The next day, when they followed his trail that far, there was a dead fox in the lane outside, ripped and drained of blood, but who would have made anything of that?

"All this happened during the run-up to ZeroSecond, when the master switch of MegaTom would be thrown, and the 30,000 years of world peace would begin. Confusion reigned. Toms were being rounded up, books and papers of fanciful nature were burned and local governments collapsed. All eyes were on the news concerning the beginnings of MegaTom, nobody bothered about the escape of a developmentally wrong child from a sanatorium. People were crazily using the remaining Toms, killing each other, killing themselves and going back in time to kill their parents to make sure they would never be born and have to get so stressed ever again. There was no room to notice the odd body in the city, drained of blood, or the odd animal in a field, when there were so many bodies, many bloodied, lying around.

"Finally, the day of ZeroSecond came. All left-over Toms were neutralised, in a way I do not pretend to understand, by an electrical wave which moved around the Earth. Everybody waited with bated breath for noon, all self-interest forgotten, as the universally advertised time approached. And then, it was all over. MegaTom was running. It consumed the entire planet, as time zone by time zone MegaTom was activated at noon around the whole world.

"With transport, food, clothing and medical care freely available from the ports of MegaTom, all

pretence of work ceased. Money, a form of portable, solidified work or energy, was abandoned. There was no paid employment ever again. Life was free and full to the brim with leisure as required. There was no government either, who would bother to try to govern somebody else or allow themselves to be governed. There was a mass exodus from the remnant cities and towns of the people remaining after the upheavals preceding ZeroSecond. People left the cities to go into the countryside and into the future, isolating themselves well away from other people and the frightening times they had just lived through, hoping to distance themselves enough to avoid being sucked back into the horrors.

"All mass media was banned within MegaTom. No newspapers, radio, television or cinema was allowed. The techniques even were quickly forgotten. They had been blamed for a large percentage of the woes of mankind. Books of an educational or instructional nature only were allowed and made available through the clothing ports or libraries that some people enjoyed opening. People were expected to find their own ways through life without the pressures of Government, Business or Social Factions to channel them. Transport, food, medicine and clothing was available at any time, in any place through the ports, and the exodus from the wreckage of the cities after the three Phases out into this brave new world with no hardships of exposure, hunger, thirst or illness was almost total. People found their own cosy corners within the 30,000 years and, with only

occasional chance meetings, lived quietly.

"But, unknown to anyone, at the time, a horror had crept into this new life with them and was slowly creeping along behind them, gathering pace. Vlad, the size of a small adult, wiry but strong, had been swept up into the inauguration of MegaTom. Hiding during the day and attacking animals at night, he hung around the city where he had been born. During the full moon he switched to people, the old and infirm, readily available, many having been abandoned in the city by the mass exodus. And here is where the real horror begins. The blood of a whole person was too much for Vlad to consume in one go, and as he progressed, refining his drinking habits to merely puncturing the throats of his victims, not ripping them out wildly, he was leaving victims who were still alive. These people, old or infirm as they were, were similarly infected by the illness that raged in Vlad beginning likewise to lust for the blood of others. This was the onset of what came to be called vampirism.

"Whatever one may come across written about vampires in old, defunct books needs to be forgotten when dealing with this particular form that has infected MegaTom. These are not the "Undead," far from it. They are living beings that need the blood from other living creatures to sustain themselves. They have no way to produce their own blood, and as blood cells decay and die naturally, they need to top up their supply of it. Red blood cells live on average about 120 days, and a large human body contains 12 pints of blood, it would seem, therefore, that by drinking a pint of blood every ten days, a

large vampire would be replete. However this only takes into account the number of red blood cells that transport the oxygen we breathe around our bodies. The blood also carries the food that feeds our cells, and this is what vampires need in much larger amounts from the ingested blood of others. A vampire's stomach, just like ours, can hold two or three pints of heavy liquid such as blood, and this constitutes a meal to them. After eating they become quiet and "digest." During the day they are in hiding from the sun because of their extreme photophobia, where exposure plunges them into a form of mental and physical paralysis, so they use little energy then, and as a result need to feed only twice a day, usually once in the evening and then once at the end of the night before sunrise. This system gives them continued existence, but is far from satisfactory to the individual emaciated vampire, who is kept, through insatiable hunger or "thirst," in a state of almost continuous blood lust.

"The vampires have an absolute "biting" order, and will attack another vampire if no other blood source is in reach. To a blood-sucker all people, vampires and animals are just mobile blood banks. They have their hierarchy or "lowerarchy" established by the time since they were bitten, body time, that is, not MegaTom time, and the depth in the lowerarchy of the vampire that bit them. Obviously Vlad, as the initiator, is at the very bottom of the pile. There was a song that became popular just after these things became generally known in the locality:

Remember life lived naturally?
Each creature secure in God's Hierarchy?
How could it end, this Colossal scheme?
What could lay low this Titanic dream?
Such Daemonic forces beam,
From the very Pit.

Vlad stands on the threshold of the Pit with all the other vampires ranged upwards above him in a huge inverted pyramid.

"You have to understand that what I am telling you now is an analysed, organised and concentrated version of events with plenty of hindsight added, that came to the unsuspecting populous in a very different way as these things were unfolding. You need to understand, also, that these creatures are all around us, now, hiding from the light, in the ruins of this small city, only waiting for nightfall to be able to come out and break their fast and sup on our blood. People throughout MegaTom must be warned of the danger, and that is why I am here, like many others, at ZeroSecond, to put this message across.

"Vampires are not very intelligent. There has been considerable neurological degeneration caused by the infection. However, they can press the red button in a port. This means, they are able to follow the last user of a port to his destination. In this way they are slowly spreading over all the continents of the Earth and throughout the 30,000 years. Vlad in particular uses this trick. When an area is becoming over-infected, and there is danger of being detected

and killed, he just enters the nearest port and hits the button. Others, having seen him do this, have learned it also and follow suit. We have no way of clearing the controls of the port we leave from but one way to reduce the problem has been thought out. If you always zero the local controls each time you leave a port or even walk past one, the vampires trying to use it will stay where they are when they press the red button. Perhaps this will eventually put them off doing it.

"In the new area where Vlad arrives, people, being completely insular, after those deadly Phases before MegaTom, can be plundered in the night with little risk of organised pursuit or even any understanding of what is happening in their loosely bound community until it is far too late, and a gang of a hundred vampires is on its nightly rampage. Some, lowly versions, are afraid of people and only attack the animals of the countryside surrounding the habitations. These animals do not become vampires. This is a human disease. Only a living human, infected by the bite of a vampire and, therefore, partially drained of blood, could become one. Animals stay animals and the dead stay dead. Even so, in our disjointed world, Vlad flits around, infecting a community here and porting off there, to wherever its last user went, to infect anew.

"There is a small group of people, of which I am one, who believe that Vlad must be stopped before he infects the whole of MegaTom. That is why I am talking to you now, in the hope that some of you may be able to help in this work."

As the speaker came to the end of his lecture,

people began to shuffle uneasily as they realised that something was required of them in response. Most began to drift away. However, three remained, Jimbo being one of them. The message had overwhelmed Jimbo. Born as he was in MegaTom, he was not used to new ideas, and this speech had contained so much that was unknown to him that he had struggled with most of what he had heard.

"How do you hope to stop him?" asked one of the other listeners.

"We hope to find him during the day of ZeroSecond, or close to it, as he crosses into MegaTom at SwitchOn and stop him before he can infect anybody here. That will send the world into a side branch of time where he never managed to infect or kill anyone in MegaTom and we will be completely free of this disease in one stroke."

"What about others he infected before SwitchOn, they will be passing into MegaTom as well?"

"That's true. But once we find Vlad, the others will be close by, and during the day we hope to find them in hiding. The early victims do not have the cunning of Vlad, they move about quite instinctively, and will be easy to find."

"How are you going to stop them?"

"We have thought about that. When we catch one of them, we will tie his hands, cover him to keep the light of day off him and take him to the nearest port. There we will put him in the seat of the medical portal and press the outside button, the one used for those accompanying the sick to press."

Jimbo knew what he meant, he had had to do that for his mother when her time came.

“Do you hope they'll be cured, then?”

“I don't know about that, but if not, like any other incurable, they won't be giving them back. Whoever runs the medical side of things, wherever they are, they do not send back incurable people, as we know, they keep them there – in hospital, or whatever, until they die.”

“Supposing Vlad only walked around for some time before he learned to use a port, there may be many cities and towns in the infected area where he first appeared, and therefore many infected people near ZeroSecond as the time counts on. How will you know which one is Vlad? Do you know what he looks like?”

“No, but we do know he was young, thin and agile. Most of his early victims were the old or infirm that he was picking off. We hope to be able to recognise him from that difference. He does answer to the name of Vlad, as well. He is cunning, but doesn't have the upbringing or training to be able to pretend to be normal. We are here, now, today, in the first day of MegaTom, if we can catch him today he won't have gone far from his entry point.

“Our biggest problem is lack of communication between search parties. What we find should be broadcast throughout the towns and cities, but mass media and any communications over distance were regarded as the biggest destroyers of the previous civilization by the world powers when creating

MegaTom. All place names were removed, so we don't even know where we are, because we come from the future times when such things don't matter to us any more, because towns and cities no longer exist. All things come to us from the nearest portal or a local tradesman, who creates for the love of it. Where are our reporters with a love of news from the four corners of MegaTom? There aren't any, because nobody is very interested in the doings of others any more. We have become totally insular, trained for generations to take no interest in what another person is doing somewhere else.

"All we can hope for, through continued searching, is to stumble upon Vlad, and put him into a medical portal. Failing that, I have a vague hope that if we send enough victims to the medics, they may realise we have a serious problem and take action to help us."

The three listeners looked from one face to the other, weighing up their chances of finding a vampire bat in a cave full of fruit bats. Finally, with some mild shrugging of their shoulders, they agreed to the idea.

"We must keep together, these creatures are dangerous when cornered. I have seen two being caught, and its not a very pleasant sight. I have with me bands to tie the wrists, and a small, thick blanket to keep the light off one if we find it. We must then bring it over to this medical portal, quickly. There are only three hours of light left, so we should start.

"By the way, apart from actually finding one in

one of the wrecked buildings, their faeces are very black and shiny ropes, like a giant fox's would be. As we search keep an eye out for that, they produce a great deal from the spent blood."

"Are we anywhere near where Vlad first appeared?" asked one of the others.

"We believe so," was the answer.

So, in company with the lecturer and the other two listeners, Jimbo set off for the nearest row of houses. The first was almost completely demolished, just a few low remnants of brick walls with doors thrown around that could have made a shelter. Picking through the rubble, turned up no sign of occupation or the faeces they were to expect. The next house had something left standing, but again, in the darker corners no trace could be found. As they moved on to the third house in the row, the lecturer pointed to a dried, grey rope in the corner of the front wall, under a bush. It was quite old, any trace of shine had gone and fungus was growing on it, turning it whitish, but there was no doubt, this was what they were looking for.

With great care they inspected the inside of the house, which still had some walls standing. Another rope of old faeces was found in a corner, but no other sign of a vampire. They searched the wrecked rooms in pairs, turning over broken furniture and ripping down cupboards as they went, until there was no where left to hide a cat, but there was nothing else to be found.

"If Vlad had some time on the loose before ZeroSecond," one of the others began, when they

were outside again, “he may have created quite a few vampires before SwitchOn, who all came through into MegaTom separately. So wouldn't there be many independent traces of vampire around ZeroSecond that have nothing to do with Vlad, himself?”

“That, unfortunately, is true, but they won't be far away from him, because without the ports of MegaTom Vlad could only walk around. But what else is there to do? We have to try to rid ourselves of all the vampires, especially Vlad, or the whole of MegaTom could fill up with them. As they have started porting all around the world, we have decided that the only point where they could be stopped for sure was at the entry point of ZeroSecond just after SwitchOn. If we can stop them here, whatever they may have done within MegaTom will be bypassed in time and won't have happened. I see nothing more important than this painstaking search.”

“So these faeces we have just found proves we are near to where Vlad, himself, entered MegaTom?” asked one.

“Exactly,” answered the lecturer. “That's what we believe. There can be no other plausible explanation.”

“Supposing, just supposing, that a vampire ported to any location and time randomly from any point on the planet near to ZeroSecond and then entered a portal used by one of us to come here, and followed us back to this time, wouldn't that mess up our theories about exactly where Vlad originated

from?"

"That is a good point, which we had necessarily pondered on for some time when it occurred to us. However, these faeces are old. We are in DayOne, so they must have been produced before the SwichOn, unless a vampire carried them here to confuse us, which is unimaginable."

"Perhaps we should mark the walls of each house we have checked with a "V," the third man continued, "that way we won't be looking through houses that have already been investigated?"

"The trouble with that, is that nothing stops a vampire from entering one of the checked houses after we have marked it," said the lecturer.

"Yes, but if we stay in the daytime of the first day, and keep coming back here to it, they will not have been able to move in the daylight, so will not have been able to get back into the marked houses."

The lecturer thought hard.

"That is a very good point. I have no answer to that. I think I need to go and consult about this idea with my group. It may represent the breakthrough we have been hoping for. Why don't you join me? We could do with the support of some more solid thinking."

With that the group broke up and after some thanks and promises on the way back, the two men heading off to consult reached the MegaTom port first. The lecturer dialled in his destination, pressed the red button and disappeared, the new recruit just pressed the button and followed. Jimbo marvelled that it was that easy for a vampire to follow

someone anywhere within MegaTom. A port always had the previous destination left dialled on it, ready for group travel if needed.

As it happened, Jimbo was the last to enter the port and copied his own numbers from his wrist into the absolute controls and, with a press of the red button, was back where and when he had started, about 20,000 years into the future. Remembering what he had been taught, he zeroed the local controls before stepping out from the portal. He took another coffee, with a bread roll and butter, at the café and sat down. This day had been a blower for Jimbo, who, being utterly provincial, knew next to nothing of the goings on into which he had been initiated. What he could see, was that there was a desire in most people to lecture others rather than converse with them. First he had been subjected to a lecture on the history of MegaTom and then to an impromptu, corrected version at the coffee-shop and then to a lecture in the city on ZeroDay on the ills of MegaTom, namely vampires led by Vlad. In all cases he had been randomly drawn into them, while not looking for anything of the sort. Now he had had to promise to go back to the city at ZeroSecond to continue the search.

As he entered the port to return home, Jimbo began to appreciate the reasoning behind the ban on mass media in MegaTom. When he had left home that day he had been a carefree youth. Now, he had troubles to think about. Other people's troubles. Distant troubles. Reportedly, having entered at SwitchOn. Reportedly, ready to infect and affect everyone. He left his home port and began to walk

across the grass towards the chalet. As he proceeded he remembered that he had not zeroed the local dials, but decided that if a vampire ended up at his local port, he would prefer it to go somewhere else if it did happen to enter the portal and press the red button. Who came up with such ideas? Who knew of the detailed history of Vlad? It must have come from one of the doctors that treated Vlad. One who had crossed into MegaTom at SwitchOn and came to recognise the syndrome of bodies that he found there.

Jimbo wondered what his mother would have said about all this. He was still young and was just carrying on with his life as she had positioned it, which was mostly free time given over to reading or walking. The books which he read were from the library of the school house in the village, mostly educational and practical self-helps as little else had been allowed in MegaTom. The walks were in and out of the surrounding neighbourhood of rolling, grassy downs dotted with feral horses, cattle and sheep and small woods with wilder animals surrounding the small streams. There were few houses, some with small farms or kitchen gardens attached and near the occasional MegaTom portals a café, workshop, village school or something similar, as the fancy took the proprietor. Jimbo tried to imagine a plague of hungry vampires rampaging through the houses at night, drinking the blood of its victims, swelling in numbers and sweeping on like a murdering tide in full flood. It didn't seem likely or even possible in such a quiet environment.

But then Jimbo was struck by an awful memory.

He remembered the port in the city at ZeroSecond that he had used to come home. He had left his numbers on the absolute controls and it was close to dusk back then, and if a vampire was next into that port and pressed the red button, it would appear right there, by his coffee shop. Jimbo shivered at the thought. He would definitely go back to that city after some food and a good, comfy sleep at home.

The chalet he called home was just as he had left it. He grabbed some food from the kitchen, feeling ravenous. The roll and butter had made him feel more hungry, rather than filling him, and he chewed at something more substantial as he passed by the open door, she had always insisted on open doors, of his mother's room. It was just as she had left it the day he had taken her, coughing blood into her handkerchief, to the medical port and lost sight of her forever. The bookcase across was full of the silly, romantic stories she liked, found for her by his father as he searched around on DayOne looking for old books. One day he would have to clear her room out, but for now he entered his own room and fell on his bed and was instantly asleep.

When Jimbo awoke it was night time. He washed and changed and grabbed more food with drink to wash it down, and was out of the door in no time. The walk across the grass to the port in the dark was uneventful. He was half expecting crawling, snarling forms to be jumping out at him from the shadows that surrounded him. He dialled up ZeroSecond on the temporal controls, adding the adjustment for the coffee-shop on the spatial, and

with one push was back in time 20,000 years where it was early afternoon and broad daylight. Quickly, reading the noticeboard again, he dialled up the town and from there the city, and was back to the point where the four had agreed to meet on the previous visit. The other three had also come back as arranged but had brought others with them, and a group of seven people was gathered at the entrance gate to the first house they had previously checked.

Jimbo could see the lecturer and his acolyte and the other listener standing, talking with three other men and a girl. As Jimbo approached the group, they all turned to greet him, but Jimbo only had eyes for the girl, who happened to be closest to him.

"Hello," she said, "my name's Angela."

Jimbo, as he gazed on her, passed quickly through the pink flush and the bright red blush, arriving at an apoplectic, sweaty purple that spread from his chest upwards into the roots of his hair.

"H-h-hello," he stammered, "I'm Jimbo."

Suddenly, in that split second, he knew why his mother had said that one day he would go courting, why she read those soppy romances that she kept in her bedroom his father had found for her and what powered the all-consuming soppiness of mankind.

"OK, Jimbo?" asked the lecturer, trying to move the subject away from his obvious-to-all distress. "We were discussing the need to demolish houses that have been checked so that they cannot be used by vampires. As we have found faeces here, we know at least one has entered MegaTom near here. If we flatten each abandoned remnant of a house as

we go, they cannot use them to hide in afterwards, even if they do manage somehow to get behind us.

“Donald here, who came to ZeroSecond looking for old books, has some maps of the area before MegaTom and says that this city was called BrightOne. He thinks it was called that because the south-west wind from the sea blows it clean and the southern sun lights it up. Anyway, other traces have been found in towns around here, so we believe we are close to the point where Vlad entered at SwitchOn. Many groups are now consolidating their forces to try to find him as he enters MegaTom. Luckily BrightOne is right on the edge of the sea, so only half the circle radiating from it needs to be searched.

Jimbo was impressed by both the logic and the map book, and said so, but more than half his mind was revelling in other impressions.

Angela... Perhaps she was an angel.

INTERLUDE

It turned out that Angela was Donald's daughter, who had just tagged along to watch, and ended up helping out. Nobody in the group could miss the fact that Jimbo was utterly smitten by her, and in return Angela appeared to take quite a fancy to him. They searched the houses together and helped with the demolitions, over forty in all, which mostly meant carefully pushing over the few remaining

walls and breaking up some doors and cupboards.

As they returned day after day to ZeroSecond from their respective homes, the members of the group would run into themselves from another time stream or see themselves across the street. Twice Jimbo made eye-contact with himself unexpectedly as he rounded a corner, they both half-smiled but neither spoke, hoping to avoid any unnecessary branching motions in the time-stream. “Well, you don't talk to yourself in the mirror,” Jimbo, who hardly talked at all, explained later.

Other groups in the city were regularly reporting finding vampires on their patches and dispatching them through the medical portals, but Jimbo's tiny group only discovered one, although more old faeces were found. With the relative lack of success, their resolve began to wane and one by one the members dropped out.

Finally, the lecturer announced that he would be moving to a more productive group two miles away. His acolyte said he would accompany him. Donald said he thought it was time to stay back at home to be with the wife, and Jimbo, with an uncharacteristic boldness that even he found shocking, asked Angela if she wouldn't mind accompanying him, to his home. She looked to her father for support and direction, and when he didn't appear to argue she simply said, “yes.”

So Angela and Jimbo moved in together, first into his old bedroom and then, after clearing out his mother's room with all the due respect she would have expected, and painting it in a brighter pink,

into the main bedroom. Angela had not had to travel far as the crow flies. She had lived with Donald and her mother only about fifteen miles away, but some 8,000 years earlier.

“Isn't it funny,” Angela opened, one day. “That first day, you went to ZeroSecond half-hoping to see your own father looking for old books and instead saw my father looking for old books? So instead of finding yourself, you found me. It's quite poetic in it's form.” Jimbo agreed, feeling abashed at failing to find the necessary rhymes or metre he was sure poetry needed. So Jimbo, in response, told Angela about his dream of the cave with the writhing woman and the rolling stone. When Angela immediately asked what had happened when he went to comfort the woman, Jimbo was dumbstruck. He had been brought face-to-face with an overriding discrepancy in his character by a question that was so simple, so obvious once heard, yet so completely beyond Jimbo's range of original thought. Angela wasn't bothered, though. She said that that is why men have women. Jimbo never had the dream again, to know if he would have followed up on the idea or not, but then he didn't need the dream, he had Angela.

In the course of time they planted some herbs, vegetables and soft fruit around the chalet as Angela liked to cook, and her mother had always had a kitchen garden. They settled down to the quiet life that a couple could expect to have in the temperate zones of MegaTom. After fifteen months Angela conceived and James, wasn't Jimbo such a silly name, was overjoyed. The medical port passed the

pregnancy as normal, just delivering some food supplements, and they waited in anticipation as Angela's tummy grew.

PART 3

Then, one day, Donald burst in.

Just like that. In the middle of the day, dishevelled, breathless, eyes opened wide with fear. James and Angela were mortified.

“What ever has happened, Dad?” she asked, stroking her tummy.

“Vampires,” replied Donald, sitting down, not yet able to breathe properly. “Oh, congratulations,” he added.

“What vampires? Where?” James demanded.

“Give me a chance... let me catch my breath... let me have some water...” Donald stuttered out.

James brought the water from the large bottle in the kitchen and Donald, sipping, slowly eased in his breathing and calmed down, physically at least.

“They came in the night, while I was at the port getting us some dinner. I couldn't have been gone more than twenty minutes. It's all my fault, why didn't I go earlier... if I had been there... why wasn't I there for her?”

“What's happened?” Angela was alarmed, sensing worse to come.

Donald looked from one to the other of them. “When I got back, Peggy, that's Margaret, your mother was gone. There was blood splattered all around the kitchen. I turned on the outside lights. The cow was lying on its side near the back door, also covered in blood, but there was no trace of your mother.”

“You have a cow?” Angela and Jimbo broke in together.

“Yes, yes... we had a cow. She came to us one day, needing to be milked. We thought she must have lost her calf. Anyway,” Donald pushed on, “your mother must have been dragged off by them.

“She's gone. I've lost her. Just like that. In a flash, she's gone. I went outside with a kitchen knife to find those vampires and kill them all and get her back, but they were gone.

“After I had run crazily around trying to find a trace of them, I returned to the house and examined the cow. From the bite marks, there must have been at least five or six of them, and now they've got Peggy with them. I've lost her...”

Donald collapsed into tears. Angela was staring, shocked and frightened. Jimbo was frozen in thought, he was struggling to climb out of his natural torpor, desperately wanting to help, to be of some use in the situation.

“You could go back in time to before it happens, and pick her from there,” suggested Jimbo.

“Yes,” agreed Donald, “except that I will be there as well, and she will belong to that me. What shall I do? Take hold of Peggy and say, 'come on, I'm your man's double, your mine now, because he is going to let you die?' Or perhaps I should kill him, like people used to before MegaTom and take his place, but not leave Peggy alone at night to go to the port for dinner?”

“No, I didn't quite mean anything like that,” Jimbo retorted sheepishly.

“No, I know you didn't,” said Donald, looking even more wild. “The truth is, as I arrived back at the house after searching around and looked at the shambles, the only thought I could keep hold of was that you might be able to help us out of it. On that thought I came straight here. I couldn't lose the idea that this was something only you would be able to put right.”

“Yes, of course he'll help,” empowered Angela from the settee. “Go on, James, I'll look after Daddy.”

“Where and when, exactly was this?” Jimbo asked, writing down the local settings needed to arrive there on his wrist as Donald told him.

In fact, Jimbo did have a plan. It had been forming in his head, as Donald talked, burning into it with a force and a clarity that few things had ever managed to generate in his life. He knew, in detail, each step he must take as if he had seen it already enacted before him.

With no more said, he took his dark coat and left for the nearest port. Dialling up the settings Donald

had given him, he altered them to use the next port, the one the other way from the house to the one that Donald had used and half an hour earlier. He appeared where Angela's parents lived and started walking quickly. It was evening there at that point, and becoming dark. Soon, over the grass, the house, isolated like most of the houses in MegaTom, came into view. The lights were on. Jimbo could see Angela's mother, Margaret, taking some milk from the cow by the back door. Donald was also visible, off to the side, moving away from the house towards their nearest port. In the distance, behind the house from where Jimbo approached, in the trees running alongside a stream, a muted uproar could just be heard, of crashing, snarling and squealing.

Jimbo ran to the house, calling to Margaret, introducing himself, and hurrying her out of the house with her coat in no time. He led the cow right up into the kitchen and closed the door on her. The hubbub from the trees was getting louder. Jimbo hurried Margaret on over the grass towards the port he had arrived in, but she kept wanting to go the other way to meet Donald. No, she had to go with him, Jimbo insisted and insisted, while the animalistic noises were seeming to cross the grass towards the house. Then the cow was lowing, then crying out as her life blood was being drained from her, but thankfully Jimbo and Margaret were nearing the port which shone blue in front of them. Jimbo was desperately helping her along, not allowing her to slow down as the end of the journey was in sight. As they arrived at the port, Jimbo felt

sure they were being followed and dialled ZeroSecond, put Margaret in, told her to wait at the other end and pressed the button for her. The booth emptied. Jimbo entered, and without changing anything followed.

At ZeroSecond Jimbo couldn't put Margaret through any more effort to throw off potential followers, so dialled home, place and time, and sent Margaret on. He followed. From there it was a shortish walk to the house, and the tearful reunion of Donald and Margaret, and of Angela, bulging with her news, with her mother. Finally, the formal introductions came of Jimbo and Margaret.

While the three chatted and cried and tried to come down from their heightened excitement, Jimbo made tea. He was lost in thought, running over the recent events in his mind, again and again, trying to grasp an idea that was far too abstruse for his educational level.

As he entered with the tea things, Margaret addressed him.

“Thank you for all that, James. But why did we have to go to ZeroSecond? I was exhausted.”

“Because of something Donald said,” Jimbo replied. “He said that he had searched around for the vampires but couldn't find them, so as we were running it struck me that if fifteen minutes later Donald couldn't find them, then perhaps they were going to follow us right into the port, and if I dialled to come here, they would be right behind us, here and now.”

The other three were frozen in time as the thought

sank in.

"I only hope that none of them thought of pressing the button again if they did arrive at ZeroSecond," Jimbo added. "Hopefully, they are back where they started from, in the ruins at SwitchOn."

"But why did you shut our poor cow in the kitchen?"

"Because Donald said the kitchen was full of blood, thinking it was yours, and I didn't want it to be yours, so I put the cow in there so that as they burst in and pounced on it, biting it, dragging it out through the backdoor, it would be its blood that would be splattered around, as well as out into the garden where they finished it off. I wanted the picture to match what Donald saw so that there would be no extra time-shifting of plaques needed to smooth out discrepancies. The last thing we want with ravenous vampires around is a time-shift."

Again three pairs of eyes stared silently at James.

"Time-shifts happen to protect the integrity of the whole. If I go back in time and kill myself when I am young, an incongruity is created, because I now have no past to put me in the present, although I am actually here. So a time-shift naturally occurs which ripples back through our branch of time securing my past, usually by bypassing the awkward events. This ripple, of course, sometimes extends beyond the person concerned, and can have consequences for others not immediately involved. A big time-shift at your house at that moment could have squeezed the vampires through to us."

“How do you know about such things?” Angela asked, in awe.

“I don't really fully understand, it's just what I've read and heard. My mother was very fearful of time-shifts. They can even cause mild earth tremors if the inconsistencies are rammed too closely together. The answer, she would say, and this comes from my father, apparently, before he left, is to appreciate the time-loops in a situation and to work with them wherever possible.

“I think, for the first time in my life, I actually did just that. My father, so my mother would say, explained them by referring to those little silverfish that sometimes run around on the floor tiles in the bathroom. They are shy, and as they look downwards, at the floor, they usually hide and follow the darker grey lines of grouting between the tiles and we don't see them.

“But if we were all flattened like them, living on a flat world on a sheet of paper, and somebody placed a pencil point on the paper, we would not see the pencil, as it was out of our dimension, but see just a point, a dot, appear. If they pushed the pencil tip into the paper, cutting into it the dot would steadily grow into a small circle. The deeper they pushed it, the bigger the circle would become until we would be able to walk all around the edge of this circle. If the pencil was then withdrawn, (and the paper returned as before) we would be left with a finite, circular track that we could move all around quite happily. But where was the starting point of that circle? Where was its ending? Both were in the dot at the centre where the pencil first emerged

and finally withdrew, but that dot is not a part of the circle, and no matter how long we walk around that circle, we will never find its beginning or arrive at its ending.

"My father had said that everything is a process. All creatures, social relationships, civilisations and even whole planets and stars are processes and just like the circle on the paper, their origin and purpose can not be found on the circle where they exist, because, like with the paper and pencil, they are created by a higher dimensional space interacting with our space. As two dimensional paper people, we were in contact with a three dimensional pencil and equivalently now, in our simple three spatial and one temporal dimensional, everyday world, we come up against the full nine dimensions of the Space/Time/Mind continuum.

"The time-loop I could see was this, Donald on returning home and finding such a disaster in his kitchen, looks quickly around inside and outside and then thinks of me. Why? He hasn't seen me for over eighteen months, and it's not that we talked much even then. It's because he can 'taste' me there, he can sense, as he desperately casts his mind around for an answer, that I am, in some way, involved. So he comes here, and I go there, carefully setting the scene, so that he will find that which he did find, and not some other situation, like no blood in the kitchen, which could have caused him to follow another course of action which would have led to a time-shift – a clash with what had happened – like going and looking for Margaret at her sister's, thinking that she must have run away

there from the vampires. If you have a sister that is, of course, Margaret.

“So with this time-loop, we can see, like with the pencil hole, there is no starting point – it is a true loop. Donald comes here because it was me who took his woman, but I took his woman because he came here. There is no beginning or end within the loop, it is like a living entity, which has evolve from a point that is not on the loop so we cannot know it.”

“Where did your father get such ideas?” Donald asked, to cover the stunned silence that followed Jimbo's impromptu lecture.

“Books. He would search around likely places near ZeroSecond, hunting for hidden copies. My mother destroyed them all in disgust, years ago when he didn't return, though. I think she did it to stop me becoming like him”

“I see, he was like me with the maps. Did he have any other ideas?”

“Plenty. But they all come to me through my mother. He talked in short announcements rather than giving lectures like 'ride the wave or go under,' or 'man was created as a problem solving animal, but not in MegaTom,' or 'the spark of the Now flows through the three dimensions of Time like a stream down a mountain.'

“He also said that Man's highest occupation was to make sense of the chaos that surrounds us, to find order in what is random. It is a bit of a problem, of course, because by definition there can be no order in the random, or it wouldn't be random. But that is

the job and so still Man has to try, and who knows, perhaps it will be found not to be so random after all.

“He did have one other basic idea, to him, the only important one. It was his pet theory that everything is made of space, not any space but the full whack Space/Time/Mind dimensional space. Space is like an infinitely long, infinitely thin strand of wool, wrapped around and around itself into a universe-sized ball in nine dimensions. As space it is stretched, under tension, and twisted and elastic, and like twisted elastic, if you ease the tension on it small knots begin to form, these are the particles of matter, living cells or thoughts. If you ease it more larger blobs form. These are the physical objects and creatures we see around us and our ideas. So each of us is a unique pattern of eased tensions at a range of points in the single strand of multi-dimensional space. MegaTom works by transferring these de-stressed patterns from one part of the strand to another. No matter, life or thought is moved, just the infinitely intricate patterns that create us. As any point in the universe can be described with a number representing the distance along the strand from the centre, any point could be reached, but MegaTom keeps us within the bounds we know. It is on this level that a time-loop as a de-stressed pattern is no different from a living creature, and it is on this level that time-shifts between the plaques of Space/Time/Mind occur to keep the world in order.”

“I don't know what 'really' happened in that kitchen, if there really is a 'really,' but I have locked

the reality for it to be the cow's blood before the plaques could re-coalesce.

“Well, talking about 'keeping the world in order,'” Margaret broke in, “what are we going to do with the vampires? They are at our house. They killed our cow. What can we do?”

“I thought they had killed you,” Donald shivered. “We just don't know how many there are. Nor how wide spread they are in MegaTom.”

“We left our home port address dialled into a port at ZeroSecond, as well,” added Jimbo. “But at least it arrives here during the day, as we did. The vampires won't be able to take the light.”

“But, you know, they won't come into our future, tomorrow or the next day. They will emerge from the port in our past, just behind you two,” mused Donald, “and from there they will have followed you to this house and killed us all, and this which we have lived for the last hour will be side-stepped in time and scrapped by the new wave of reality.”

“In that case,” Angela concluded, “we needn't worry about you being followed from ZeroSecond, the four of us as we are now, will never have existed if they do, or did, come.”

“That still leaves us with packs of vampires roaming within the system,” said Margaret, returning to her point. “That's how they came to our place, not through ports. What can we do to protect ourselves from <u>them</u>?”

“That calls for a fence,” said Donald. “One high enough and strong enough to keep them out.”

“Or an island,” returned Margaret. “From what I heard tonight, although it wasn't really tonight, and from what you saw, I don't believe any fence or wall could stop their level of mania and frenzy for long.”

“An island, with one portal for our food and clothing and medical needs would be ideal,” expanded Jimbo, getting into the subject.

“But what if they came through the port?” asked Angela.

“Then we could completely cage the port,” put in Donald, still wanting to fence them off, “and if we catch any, we could put them in the medical portal during the day when they are immobilised by the light, and that would be the end of them.”

“Wouldn't they come over the water in boats?” asked Angela.

Donald answered. “It's unlikely, with MegaTom providing transport and food, there are very few boats. Mostly, yachts and dinghies for fun. I can't imagine vampires managing any open water in one of those.”

“That all makes sense,” said Jimbo, “but I would much prefer to deal with them here, rather than running away from them. Not that anything binds me to this vicinity, it just seems a bit of a drastic move at the first hint of them.”

“It's not so drastic if the whole of MegaTom is riddled with gangs of them. Just remember how you had to run with Margaret during our first “hint” of them. You're lucky to still be around for a second, and so am I, as you two appear to have led them away from the portal where I was getting our

dinner. If I had met them in the dark, face to face, unexpectedly, as I returned across the grass, I don't imagine I would have survived. I'd be one of them, now. So I wouldn't have come here to get you, so it would have been Margaret's blood in the kitchen, not the cow's."

"Oh," said Margaret and Angela, together.

"And we would never even have known about it, either," added Angela.

"Our big problem for deciding a course of action," stated Donald, "is the lack of information within MegaTom. When they created it, they decided that knowing everybody else's business in the whole world was detrimental to happy, healthy living. It filled the people's heads with irrelevancy or targeted untruths which worked against the greater good and benefited a scheming minority. So we have a whole planet spanning over 30,000 years, with no detailed information, unless we take up the gauntlet and actually go somewhere and see for ourselves."

"Exactly," said Jimbo, "and we have no idea what is happening around us, out there in the big world. There could be just tens of them fighting against the light every day and losing, or we could be standing in the only space, at the only time, in the whole world, that is not completely overrun and infested."

"Shouldn't we be armed in some way?" asked Angela, "vampires can be killed like anybody else, I think."

"They can, but weapons have gone the way of the news," Jimbo answered, "who needs weapons

within MegaTom?"

"If I should happen to be woken up in bed with a vampire standing over me, I would like to have a weapon to hand," Angela continued. "I wouldn't have time to wait for sunrise to drag him, screaming, to the nearest portal."

"But would you be able to kill one?" Margaret asked.

Angela looked bothered, "I'm not sure. Anyway, I would want James to have a weapon at least."

"That's true," said Margaret, "and Donald should have one as well."

"But what weapons would that be?" asked Jimbo. "No guns have ever been allowed in MegaTom, the whole process of making explosives has been lost. We haven't armed ourselves, ever. We've never needed to."

"Knives," said Angela, "you should have a good knife with you at all times. Imagine if they had caught you, when you were running with mother? With a good knife you could have cut one of them and made it bleed so the others would have turned on him to eat from him as easy prey and you two could have escaped."

"Hmm," Jimbo could see that Angela's visualisations were far beyond his own. Attacking somebody with a knife, deliberately drawing blood, even a vampire's blood seemed a long way out of his character set, to say the least.

"So, it's agreed then, in principle," said Donald, "because of the lack of real information on

numbers, and to protect ourselves, we should equip and find an island with one portal, where we can strictly control our portion of the environment."

"Yes," said Margaret and Angela.

"It seems so," said Jimbo, not able to find an argument against the proposal. "Two portals, I think, would be better, though. If there was to be an incident at one, we could escape through the other."

"Good," said Donald. "We need a plan of the world, which, unfortunately, has been suppressed in MegaTom, but I have one. I found it in BrightOne at ZeroSecond when we were searching the houses. It's a huge book of maps with all the portals marked with their settings, not individually, of course, there are sixty million of them, but in numbered blocks. I'll go and get it."

"Perhaps we should go to the Arctic Circle," Margaret suggested, as Donald was hurrying out the door. "There they have 24 hours of daylight, so no vampires can be active there. Then when the sun finally goes the other way we can port to Antarctica and have 24 hours of daylight again."

"That could work," Jimbo agreed. "We would just run two houses, one each end of the world. A bit cold, though. Not that the ports wouldn't cater to our specific needs. Of course, come to that, we wouldn't need two houses, if, when the summer ends we just port ourselves to the next spring... Then we could stay in the same place and skip the winters altogether."

"Despite my earlier feelings, what I don't like," Angela cut in, "is knowing that at any time we

could cease to exist, because vampires found our settings on a port, followed them and killed us in the past. That is - what we are living right now could just not have happened after all in the fullness of time."

"It's not easy to sit comfortably with such a thought," Jimbo agreed.

"It does my head in, trying to think about it. Can't you make one of your time-loops to protect us, James? Otherwise whatever we do do could be undone before we've done it from the past."

"There's no loop there," Jimbo explained, "it's just a line that gets redirected behind us. How can I loop a straight line?"

Donald re-entered, out of breath. "Sorry I took so long, I was trying to cover my tracks in the ports by using other addresses, but whenever and wherever I went, I still had to put this address in the end. So I had to leave it on a port, anyway. Which is the best one to leave it on? Answer – where there will be no vampires. Where is that? Answer – I have no idea.

"Still, here is the book of portal lists and a country atlas, and I think using those we could find an island with just two portals, somewhere around the coast, that is not too far from what we are used to. Same climate and so on. I thought that if we have metal cages built around the ports, with keys that we kept, then if a vampire appeared in one during the night, it, or they, would not be able to get out, and in the day, when it was disabled by the sunlight, we could then, using sticks, push it around into the medical portal and press the button and

send it off without even having to open the cage. That is if it didn't port itself somewhere else first in frustration."

"That sounds like some good, solid thinking," Jimbo answered. "By the way, you took hardly any time, so you must have set the time on the port to the same as when you left."

Donald laughed, "I suppose I did."

"But listen," Jimbo continued, "Margaret had the idea of living in two houses alternately near the poles, when it is always daylight, so that there is light at all times, and then we would be safe from vampires."

"That's true. Good." Donald smiled at Margaret.

"I extended the idea by saying that one house would do if we used the ports to skip the winters."

"Even better," added Donald.

"In that case," Angela, who had been merely listening, became involved, "why don't we stay here and use the ports to skip the nights? Each evening we could go to the nearest port and dial up the next morning? Then, as we return, we will know if vampires have been around during the night, we will see their mess."

All three looked at Angela with wide-open eyes.

"Could it be that easy?" Jimbo mused. "Just skip the nights?"

"Skip the nights, skip the winters or skip the country?" Donald mused. "If we take it step by step, we may be able to stay ahead of them. They are not very clever. The virus damages their brains

and the force of the feeding frenzies interferes with and overrides their remaining thought processes. They are starved of many nutrients. However, they are not brute animals, they can still think."

"We could set traps," Jimbo suggested, "baited with some meat or blood, that they could walk into in the night and get stuck. Then in the morning, off to the medical port, and gone."

"Yes, a sort of cage on wheels, with a spring loaded door." Donald was getting heated. "We could have one made by a blacksmith. I know where there is one."

"How many attacked our cow, did you say?" Margaret reminded him. "One cage wouldn't be enough, they hunt in packs. Each night the pack must increase, it must double in size, then when it's too big it'll split up into more smaller packs that will in time grow larger again. They will come in their hordes. Too many for a cage or two to hold. At least the animals are not infected, can you imagine herds of rabid cows or rabbits or dogs. Vampires don't mind animal blood, they will take the animals of each area along with the people, perhaps even before, as they have little defence."

"True. Whatever happens, we should just never see another night," Angela agreed. "With or without a cage. Here, in the arctic or on an island."

"We should stay here, I think," Donald said. He had received the slap from his wife and calmed down. "The ports give us everything we need – food, clothes, medical care – as long as we only live during the day, we should be alright."

“What will the vampires do, during the daytime?” Margaret asked. “Can they exist in the dark during the day in a cupboard? Or in a shed? Or under the floor? Or in a hole they've dug in the garden? Or in the woods down by the river? Can they emerge from hiding when it's overcast or during a storm, when it gets quite dark?”

“The one I saw in BrightOne just cowered away from the light when we uncovered him. He was skin and bone, curled up in a corner of masonry with an old door and some rags on top of him. What he would have been capable of in the dark or dim light I don't know, we just trussed him up and carried him to the medical portal as he was.”

“And you are the only one of us who has even seen one,” Jimbo added, “but he must have been one of the old people that Vlad was feeding on before MegaTom.”

“But we have heard them,” Margaret pointed out. “They didn't sound too old or puny in the dark.”

“No,” Jimbo remembered his horror thinking he might not be able to get Margaret to the port before they pounced. “It was harrowing.”

“If we are to stay ahead of them using the ports to skip the nights,” said Angela, re-entering the main theme, “we will have to get used to sleeping during the day.”

“Exactly,” Margaret butted in, “that was my point. Will we be safe during the day in the house, with the curtains drawn so we can sleep? Or will they be able to tolerate the low light levels and spring out at us from a cupboard where they had

hidden themselves the night before while we were skipping it?

"You see, James left the cow in our kitchen with the light on. Yet the vampires were able to bite her, spreading her blood around, and drag her out into the night where they killed her. The light in the kitchen may have bothered them but it didn't stop them."

Jimbo and Donald looked at each other without speaking. A cold fear had engulfed them all. The problem of survival had just become much more difficult. Artificial light didn't completely stop the vampires, then.

Jimbo and Donald toured the chalet, taking down curtains and removing cupboard and wardrobe doors, trying to make sure that no dark corner or hidey-hole could be used during the night.

"We need an indicator on the doors and windows," Margaret said when they returned. "We need to know quickly if the house has been attacked during the night while we are away from it."

"The windows can be barred with wooden slats from a bed," Jimbo suggested, "Then we will see if they have broken into one easily from outside."

"And the two doors can have drop down bars on the outside with little flags that will show if they have been touched," Donald added.

Angela was becoming panicky as the security arrangements brought home the truth of their new-style lives and began to cry. "It's too late now," she sobbed, "it will be dark soon, we have to go."

“Yes,” Jimbo answered, “we had better not risk falling asleep, now.”

“I don't know if I can cope,” Angela sobbed, as Jimbo moved to comfort her.

“Hormones,” Donald whispered. “It's the pregnancy. Margaret would get like that at times.”

The two couples, men escorting their women, left the house and Jimbo with difficulty locked the door. “I'm surprised I could find the key,” he said, “I haven't locked this door in years.

EPILOGUE

Life continued for James and Angela and Donald and Margaret in its new truncated form – days only. Jimbo and Donald each carried a hunting knife, a stout man-sized pole and a coil of rope at all times. The windows of the house were grilled with vertical wooden slats, not to keep vampires out so much as to reveal if they had broken in during the night. The doors were barred with removable planks that dropped into slots, both inside and out dependant on where the four were at any time, fitted with Donald's flag system only on the outside to show if they had been tampered with. Two loud alarm clocks, from a clock-maker known to Donald, were in prominence inside, set for an hour and half-an-hour before sunset to ensure the party could not oversleep or just forget themselves.

Sleeping during the day, initially every other day and then for a few hours each day was taking its toll on Angela, whose life was in turmoil and whose nerves were being stretched beyond their limits. The background of cold fear was eating into her. She couldn't escape from it. It showed in the striped sunlight across the rooms shed by the barring of the windows, in the weaponry that James always had with him, in the worry lines on the faces of the other three but mostly within the attitude of listening during the frozen silences that they had all adopted. They talked in whispers. Waiting... Just waiting...

Then, one sunny day, they heard a noise. It seemed to come from under the middle of the lounge floor. It sounded like a stifled cough. Jimbo and Donald pulled away the chairs and mats and using their knives levered up some of the floorboards. As the light, dimmed though it was, entered the space below the house, a thin wailing and whining came from the hole. Using their poles and ropes the men were able to extract the pitiful, blinded and cringing creature, bind it and carry it, covered in a tablecloth, on one of the poles to the nearest MegaTom port, where they placed it in the medical portal and pressing the outside button, dispatched it.

When they returned home triumphantly, they found Margaret running from the kitchen in great distress. Angela had started to bleed and had collapsed on the kitchen floor.

It was in a different mood that the two men returned to the medical portal, this time with Angela between them. They placed her on the small flip-

down seat and pressed the button. After the two second delay to allows helpers to vacate the unit, Angela vanished, and almost immediately returned, dressed in her cleaned and pressed clothes.

“I'm so sorry James,” she said, looking pale and sunken, not able to hold Jimbo's eyes, “I've lost the baby. They said probably either the foetus was wrong or the stress we have been going through was too much for me.”

Jimbo surrounded Angela with his arms and comforted her as the three of them walked slowly back to the chalet.

Back home Angela fell into an armchair. Margaret took Donald into the kitchen to make “tea,” and Jimbo knelt down in front of Angela holding her hands.

“Oh, James, it was terrible,” she said, shaking as she recalled the ordeal. “They did what they could, but it was all over, really. My womb had rejected the embryo and it was already dropping. They cleaned me up and checked me over and had my clothes washed. I was there for about six hours all together, they were very good. Finally, they said I could leave and after I had dressed they put me in a port and sent me back.”

“I'm so glad,” said Jimbo. “Not for what has happened,” he added quickly, “but because you came back. When I took my mother to the portal she never came back. I never saw her again. I hadn't even said goodbye. I had a terrible dread that I would never see you again, either.”

Jimbo cried, and Angela held his head as they

cried in sympathy together for their losses and in gratitude for having each other.

Donald and Margaret entered from the kitchen with the tea things.

“We're so sorry for your loss, Dear,” said Margaret. “Perhaps something had gone wrong with the baby with so much stress around.”

Jimbo withdrew as mother, father and daughter commiserated. Finally, Donald straightened up.

“That settles it,” said Donald taking control, “we need to find an island and prepare it our way, and we had better do it pretty soon.”

Through moistened eyes, the other three looked at him, and slowly each one agreed.

LIFE FIVE

VLAD

PROLOGUE

Having pushed the decision to move to an island upon the other three, Donald took the active role and was absent while "doing things" each day. Not that his activities necessarily took the time he was missing from the chalet, he often worked longer

hours, but returned each day via the ports of MegaTom to the right time to eat, rest and accompany Margaret, Jimbo and Angela to the nearest port in order to skip the hours of night. Donald never used the nearest port for his return trips in case a vampire could use the settings left on the previous port controls to follow him back to the chalet. Margaret had said that that was silly because the settings would always deliver the vampire into broad daylight, which it wouldn't be able to bear, but Donald had said it was better to be safe than sorry. So each day's work for him ended with a walk home from a port some miles away.

Angela was asking James to go with Donald, but Donald wouldn't hear of it and so Jimbo stayed at home with his convalescent wife and her mother, who busied herself "tidying" around the house. Angela was secretly relieved as the stress of being alone with her mother without a man in the place where a vampire had recently been found under the floorboards could have been too much for her frazzled nerves after her miscarriage. However, she was feeling stronger, even in the striped light from the barred windows, and James was a "treasure of attentiveness."

Finally, Donald didn't go out in the morning. He stayed home and slept, catching up on the sleep he had missed while working his overlong hours. He woke up with the one hour alarm and hurriedly washed and dressed. He laid an old map on the coffee table in the lounge, and pointed to a dot off the south-west coast.

"That," he announced to the others, "is the Isle of

Lundy. It's about a dozen miles off from the mainland. A few people lived there at ZeroSecond when MegaTom was switched on, but the young soon left and the elderly died off. From around the year 500 onwards it is completely empty. There are two MegaTom ports there. With help from a blacksmith and a shipwright, well boatman anyway, I have caged both ports solidly with entrenched iron and have taken two small sailing dinghies and put them in the only boathouse. I have also seen goats, sheep and deer on the north end and took two puppies to the south. There is a decent place to live there, it will need a bit of tidying up, but it's also a bit of a surprise. I have checked all the other remnant buildings there. There are no vampires, but I have stocked the place with knives, staves and rope, just in case."

The half-hour alarm rang.

"Time to go to the port, now, but I suggest tomorrow, we pack up here and leave."

PART 1

The four arrived at the south portal and had to remove themselves in turn from the painted iron cage that surrounded it. Above them stood Donald's big surprise. It was simply that the new home was attached to an old lighthouse on the top point of the

hill. The crew quarters was made of solid stone and had two floors with plenty of rooms awaiting development and a woman's touch, and a ground floor corridor that ran into the base of the lighthouse. From the top of the lighthouse the view was out over the entire island, which was about three miles long and a half a mile wide. The blue lights of both MegaTom ports, could be seen through the disrespectful metalwork that surrounded them, shockingly. Jimbo, Angela and Margaret had never seen such a thing before. Portals had always been sacrosanct. The portal they had used was quite close by, centring the main southerly bulge of the island and the other was well up the island to the north where it slowly tailed off, teardrop fashion, into the sea. The two puppies were all around them, full of needs and couldn't be ignored.

Routine life was established on the island quite smoothly as the quartet continued in their respective roles. They still kept up the daily port to the next day, bypassing the nights, although it seemed to be a bit of an excess on an island twelve miles from the mainland, with no other person on it and both portals caged. Each of them had a key to the cages, which opened both cages, and were religiously kept on leather thongs around their necks. The puppies grew. They were small, brown and white dogs, that ran around all day with their noses to the ground, sniffing and snuffling. Donald returned one day from porting around with another four puppies of a different breed.

“They're a litter of hounds,” he offered. “They can stay outside on patrol around the building.”

That evening after dinner he said, “I thought the dogs would be a good early warning system in case of invasion. They don't miss a thing snuffling around all day. Also the grazing animals to the north will make an easier target than us, and should give us a bit of a buffer in case of attack.”

“Aren't you overdoing it a bit?” Margaret asked. “We're on an island, the ports are locked up, we have a lighthouse tower right next to us provisioned with preserved food, where we can lock ourselves in if threatened, and if we should need to escape over the sea, we have two little boats to use. All provided by you, of course, with your foresight, but six dogs is a whole pack.”

“There are things that I haven't told you about,” Donald replied, “things I hear and see while I am away gathering stuff.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Angela put in.

“Well, for one,” Donald continued, “when I took a new utilities unit from the food portal for this place, it didn't work.”

“And what is a utilities unit, exactly?” Angela asked.

“It's a special Tom, designed to connect us to the electricity, air-conditioning, water and sewage supplies. Power, filtered air and clean, drinking water come in to us through it and our waste matter and fluid is removed by it. It's a cube about eighteen inches across with various connectors, meters and switches showing on three sides around it and the top. One side is electricity, one water and one sewage. The top gives conditioned air. We just

connect it up and set the controls. What happens inside it, is perhaps known to the controllers of MegaTom, it's a mystery to me, but it is very good at its job and utterly essential to us within MegaTom for our comfortable lives."

"Oh, you mean one of those things. You've told me all about them when I was young."

"Yes. Well, one of the new ones I took for this place wouldn't work. I had to dump it and take another one."

"And that worked?"

"Yes, we are using it now. But my point is that in all the years I have been taking things from the portals - foods, medicines, clothes and utility units, and I've taken a few of them for various people, nothing has ever failed to do its job. Everything worked perfectly. So, on my travels I have been asking around. Nobody had ever heard of anything new failing, until very recently."

"One failure in a thousand, then," said Jimbo, "doesn't sound too bad."

"No, it doesn't," agreed Donald, "but that is still missing the point. These units are exact copies made with a duplicator of the original unit held wherever MegaTom is controlled from. If a duplicated copy fails then there must be some problem at this MegaTom Control."

"Why would that worry you so much?" Margaret asked.

"Because," Donald was arriving at his point, "if there is a problem with MegaTom Control, it may

be that somehow the vampires are connected with it. We don't need to imagine two different causes of disaster."

"But where is this MegaTom Control?" Jimbo asked. "Is it near to us?"

"Nobody knows," Donald replied, "It may be inside MegaTom, on some large isolated island or it may be completely outside the 30,000 years, somewhere."

Jimbo remembered listening to the same suppositions from the self-confessed lecturer. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"It must be a huge place," Angela put in, "all those requests for food and clothes and medical support for 30,000 years worth of people have to be processed somewhere. Where I was taken with the miscarriage looked like the insides of a huge complex, but it could have been anywhere. I was kept in my bed for the time I was there. There weren't any viewable windows."

Donald looked pensive. "I have old maps showing a large desert in north Africa. I have heard that they have reclaimed much of it using giant versions of our utility unit to constantly pump water into it. Perhaps that is where the Control Centre is located."

"Where do you hear about such things?" Jimbo marvelled.

"Oh, he has 'friends,'" Margaret laughed. "All around the place he has his cronies who know something about everything. You wouldn't believe some of the stories he comes back with."

“Anyway,” said Donald, trying to keep his momentum going, “one of these friends did tell me a story. He was away from home, working, and as he was approaching a port to get some lunch something black appeared in the portal, the portal fired and it quickly disappeared. He knows it happened, he saw the light turn red and then back to blue, but he had no time to see what was there. It was a black shapeless thing, shorter than any adult person. It could have been an animal, but animals don't press red buttons to escape. It shook him up. It wasn't a normal event that happens every day. To him there was something seriously wrong about it.

“Then, I talked to another guy who knows somebody who's got the travel-bug, and he says that there are whole areas of this country swarming with vampires at various points in the timeline of MegaTom. There are no people or animals left alive in places and the vampires turn on each other for blood. There's no loyalty between them. They may appear to team up to get at us, but they will easily turn on the lesser of their own kind if they need to.

“Then another friend said that their local food portals had all stopped working for some time, just refused to give out any food. That's worrying. That's why I'm so glad to see some goats and sheep up the other end of the island. You never know what's coming. By the way, I found an old coop in a tumbledown farmyard half way along the west side of the island and have put some chickens and two roosters there. I have left the door open so they can roam about during the day. I was going to let them increase in number before we start cropping

the eggs or chickens. The dogs will have to be on guard against foxes, though, if there are any around."

"So that is why you are so worried," Margaret said, turning him back again, "you hear wild stories like that."

"Not just those," Donald replied, "many, many of them. They all fall into one of two categories, though both are completely unimaginable – packs of vampires ranging over the countryside, killing, is one set and MegaTom breakdowns, the other. A year ago I wouldn't have believed a word of either of them."

"You are right there," said Jimbo, "I still find it hard, now, not to think that these men are just making things up to have something interesting to say. Can it really be so bad? I know we left the mainland in horror, but I think I have always hoped that we were really overemphasising the danger, over-reacting to it."

"I feel a bit like that, at times," Angela added. "But the stress of it did lose me our baby, reality or not."

"I believe them," said Donald. "These are ordinary people who, while doing their jobs around, get to see things. Like, for instance, the blacksmith who helped me to cage our ports. That was a shock to see, I suppose?"

"It really was," answered Angela and Jimbo together.

"But I never told you what he had told me that made me do it. While he was working away from

home he entered an area where all the ports had been damaged. Not just randomly vandalised, but systematically damaged. The travel, medical and clothing portals were destroyed, completely put out of action, but the food portals were left intact. After some talking to a few of the locals he understood that there were vampires around that were allowing them to continue to eat, to keep up their strength (and therefore their blood supply), but not allowing them to escape easily or dress or put vampires into the medical ports to get rid of them, as we all, invariably, do."

"Is it possible vampires can really plan ahead like that?" Jimbo asked.

"Apparently so," replied Donald, "which put things in a very different light. Apart from Vlad, the originator of it all, all vampires were human once. How much of their innate abilities they keep, we don't really know. We've only seen a few odd ones who may not have been up to much as people, anyway. Also in a group they may copy each other and devise and evolve new tricks to get at us."

The one hour alarm rang and broke up the discussion as they left to wash and prepare to skip the night.

Life continued, and days turned into weeks and weeks into months. The island was licked into shape by the two couples, the other buildings investigated in detail and every inch regularly walked over by each of them. The dogs had all grown to full size though small in stature and the chickens had managed to increase their numbers

somewhat and the sheep, goats and deer were ably taking care of themselves. A vegetable garden had been created south of the lighthouse, and some patches of cereals - corn, wheat and rye scattered around near the chickens. The grazers lived on the grass and weeds that spread to the low cliffs that edged most of the island with added peelings and vegetables tops from the garden. There could be no cow for Margaret's milk though, without a roaming bull to impregnate it, a cow would not have produced milk, and nobody fancied a rampant bull loose on the island.

There were quite a few sessions down at the boathouse, as they struggled from scratch to learn the skills needed to launch a dinghy, set a sail or row across the small bay. Weather was a big factor. Few days were suitable. The sea was often too rough, or it was raining, or foggy, or too windy, or too cold.

Then one day Angela announced that she thought she was pregnant again and Jimbo accompanied her to the medical portal. He waited as she stood there and pressed the button. Instantly, Angela just appeared to change position, a written diagnosis slid out of the slot with some dietary additives. On the paper it said “Pregnancy. 6 weeks. Take one tablet with each meal.”

That was a day for celebration. Angela was to be a mother, James (official name) was to be a father and Margaret and Donald were to be grandparents. All felt that a weight had been lifted from their shoulders. Some kind of normal life was again opening up for them. The anguish of Angela's

miscarry and subsequent barren days of the recent past could be consigned to history and their lives reconnected to the better times, before the vampire attack on Margaret.

A week later, a great noise was heard coming from the southern portal. When Donald and Jimbo went to investigate they found a man in the cage shouting and banging on the bars.

“Why, it's John, the blacksmith,” Donald said as they were approaching the port. “Hello, John. What's going on?”

Donald unlocked the cage and the man came out, throwing a greeting to Jimbo and Donald as Donald locked the cage again.

“Can we go and sit down?” he asked with his eyes lowered as the three faced each other.

So back in the kitchen of the house, which he knew from when he had helped Donald cage the ports and pipe-in the utilities unit, and after drinking some water, John the blacksmith told his story with everybody listening.

“They have wiped us out. Vampires everywhere. They smashed the port and the house and the shop during the night while we were skipping. They took all the tools from my smithy and used them to do it. Everything's wrecked. Sledge hammers went through the lot. Found one dead where the end of the house had fallen on him. He looked evil. Starving but sinewy and strong. Capable. He'd been drained of blood from six or seven places after being knocked out. Our two dogs, big ones as you know, were dead and drained as well. How many

there were altogether, we don't know. As we searched the wider area around we found three more houses flattened, people gone, and five more ports smashed.

“The evening before we'd had a surprise when we couldn't dial up our port the next morning on the local settings, but we never considered such an attack was going to be launched upon us. Stupidly, we just dialled up the nearest port we could connect with, and went. Mind you, I don't know what we could have done, anyway.

“I didn't know how to proceed, until I remembered your island with its granite houses, Donald. I've left the wife and the boys there, at the nearest port and have come to ask if we could move onto the island as well, perhaps in that castle keep down the hill overlooking the bay. It's only the four of us, we could set up in that block. It's on the east of the island, and you wouldn't even know we were there.”

“Of course you can,” responded Margaret, without a moment's hesitation, having been listening intently. “Go and get your family and bring them here, immediately,” and as she spoke she offered John the blacksmith her key to the port cages from around her neck.

After John the blacksmith had gone, there was the makings of a lively discussion in the kitchen.

Donald opened it by saying, “I don't know how you could have agreed, just like that, Peggy.”

“Because,” Margaret answered, “John was instrumental in giving us the freedom and safety of

this place when we needed it, desperately. It would have been unthinkably rude to turn him away in his family's hour of need. I knew you wouldn't be able to say "yes" without a long delay of weighing it up which would have embarrassed both of you, so I overrode you and instantly agreed. You would have agreed in the end, anyway, I just spared us some awkwardness with our new neighbours."

"Well, that's true," Donald agreed, turning a bit ruddier as his personal psychology was laid bare for the family to see.

"It won't be the same, now," Angela said, "but we did have to agree."

"True," accepted Jimbo, swallowing his disappointment. "We couldn't have turned them away. The island doesn't belong to us. It was polite of him to come and ask us in the first place. Anyway, did you hear what he said about the attack? The vampires are smashing everything so people will have no way to escape them."

"It sounds like what we were doing to them at ZeroSecond in BrightOne," Angela replied. "First we dragged them out into the light and banished them through a MegaTom medical port, and then smashed the remains of the houses where they had been hiding from the sun. Now they drag us out and drink our blood, and smash our houses and the portals."

"You can't feel any pity for them, surely?" Jimbo asked.

"No," Angela answered, "It's not pity, exactly... Perhaps some vague understanding of their plight."

There was a knock on the door. The first knock since they had been living on the island. It was John the blacksmith with his wife, who was called Maureen and their two sons, twins in their late teens, called Peter and Paul. Introductions were made with plenty of smiles and gratitude. As the women headed for the kitchen to make tea, Maureen was admiring the overall layout of the site.

“I see you have sheep on the island,” she said. “It gives me the idea of trying carding, spinning and knitting wool. I have had an old book on it since I was a girl, and this seems like the ideal time, and necessary climate, to give it a go.”

“What a good idea,” Margaret replied, “If you let me in on the secret, I'll try as well.”

“Don't leave me out,” laughed Angela, stroking her tummy.

Leaving the women to commune over tea in the kitchen, the men headed to the U-shaped block of the “castle” that overlooked the main bay with the only jetty and boathouse. It was a two-story granite affair, with plenty of rooms, and in reasonable condition inside and out, with the outer windows high off the ground. They quickly saw that with one of the arms set up as a smithy, John could soon be back in full swing. They also saw that from there, if the mists and fog kept away, the mainland would be quite visible.

Donald and Jimbo helped John, Peter and Paul to get the place equipped, porting here and there with whatever could be salvaged from their old house - some personal items that were kept in a solid chest,

crockery, cutlery and pans saved by the sideways collapse of the kitchen, and replacements for the things that could not be saved. Margaret and Angela helped Maureen to clean up and sweep it all through. All that was left was for John to see his friend Billy the boatman to transport the heavier gear, that couldn't fit in a portal, from his old smithy to the new one, over the twelve miles or so of water.

In two days the blacksmith family was established. Donald, as the expert, installed three utility units, one just to power the smithy. After that, as was customary in MegaTom, there was little contact between the two families. In fact for Margaret and Angela, who tended to keep to the west of the island anyway, the only difference was the noise of metalwork sometimes sounding from the castle keep during a lull in the steady westerly blowing of the wind. Duplicate keys were made for the port grilles, so that everybody had one, and the only noticeable difference between the two families was that the blacksmiths did not skip the nights. John had said that he was not going to leave another home at night for the vampires to demolish. He was prepared to defend it to the death. As their U-shaped building had all its doors on the inside part of the U, the three men had immediately constructed a high railing right across the opening, where a wall had previously stood, to close off any access. The double gates set into it had a separate key and sturdy bolts on the inside for the night. Two, large, black puppies had a good-sized kennel in a corner out there and spent the nights, off their chains, outside.

Donald asked John to fortify, with a cage with lock and bolts, the only door into the lighthouse and keeper's cottage which was in the corridor between the two, and so everybody on the island ended up with two keys hanging round their necks on thongs, one for the ports and one for their home. However, while the caged door, the dogs and the night skipping made the two couples in the lighthouse feel safer, more deeply within them, the very need for such precautions after the vivid reports of the attack on the blacksmiths on the mainland made them feel more endangered. Angela was beginning to feel the stress of their earlier life creeping back as the recent freedom of blissful island life dissolved. Donald started talking about having the windows barred, and the thought of the daylight being striped again put more pressure on Angela. Perhaps being pregnant once more reminded her of what they had been through themselves on the mainland, which had resulted in the loss of her first baby. Perhaps, as Donald insisted, hormones also played their part.

One day, Billy the boatman turned up in his sailing launch. His wife having died some years before, he lived with two dogs aboard his boat, and used it to carry larger goods up and down the coast for anyone in need. He had brought some more metal over from John the blacksmith's old forge, but he also had plenty on his mind. John called Donald and Jimbo over to hear what he had to say.

“Unless its a full-blown storm,” Billy began, “I sleep onboard with the boat at anchor in a bay off the mainland. Lately I've been hearing some strange noises in the night from on shore and the

dogs get restless. When I heard shuffling steps on the deck last night, I loosed the dogs through the hatch and they cornered a vampire against the gunwale. It was ready to attack but I had a boat hook to hand and as luck would have it, it was wearing a leather belt. The hook caught in its belt and I easily pushed it over the side and was able to hold it under until it drowned. I wriggled the boat hook free, and the body went straight down, with no fat to keep it afloat, of course. Then I saw lying just off from my launch an empty rowing boat, drifting on the tide. I could hardly believe that this thing had actually managed to row out to my boat, but then I remembered that, indeed, it wasn't wet before I pushed it into the water. So, I'm just warning you, be alert, they are getting desperate and trying new tricks.

"I think they can hear you working in the forge, John, and see your fire and smoke. I don't know for sure, but I think you have caught their interest."

Donald and Jimbo went back home with the news. After they had told Margaret and Angela, Donald added, "just as well he came. I was thinking that we could perhaps spend the nights here as well, instead of skipping them. I thought it might give us a relief from feeling we need to be on guard all the time."

Angela burst into tears and Jimbo took her to lie down.

When he returned he said, "I'm afraid she winding herself up again, like before. It's very worrying. We don't want her to lose another baby."

“I'll take her a cup of tea,” Margaret responded, “and have a little chat with her.”

“Perhaps,” Jimbo said to Donald, “we shouldn't tell her things like that when we hear them, from now on.”

“Perhaps not,” Donald agreed. “I don't like secrets in the house, though, it creates factions between people and awkwardness and in the end builds up even more stress.”

A few days later, however, the next incident couldn't have been kept from Angela, because she was at the centre of it. She had gone for a walk with Margaret and the two dogs, before lunch, towards the northern end of the island, checking on the chickens and then watching the sheep and deer, which had little fear of people, grazing. In horror, they saw that somebody was bending down next to one of the sheep and sunlight glinted off a blade. They hurried forward, calling, as Maureen, John's wife, stood up with an armful of fleece and a pair of shears.

“Needed some more wool,” she said apologetically as she saw the two women hurrying towards her.

“That's fine,” said Margaret with relief. “It's not a problem.”

“Sorry,” confided Angela, “It's my fault. I'm a bit nervy at the moment. I thought you might be a vampire that had managed to overcome their problem with the sunlight. It was a horrifying idea. I'm so sorry, Maureen.”

Angela and Margaret said their goodbyes and

began to return home. Looking back they could see Maureen continuing with the fleecing. The northerly port was about a quarter of a mile away off to the side when, suddenly, the blue light on top turned red to show it was in use. A black mass appeared at the bottom of the south-facing travel portal, a flattened thing like a half empty, black sack only a fraction of the height of a man. It started the dogs barking in a frenzied way, but before either Angela or Margaret could decipher what it was through the cage bars, it had disappeared with the light turning back to blue.

Hearing a shout, they turned quickly back towards the lighthouse to see Jimbo rushing towards them with a pole and rope. He was calling out as he ran. Soon they could hear him clearly.

“What was it?” he puffed, as Maureen also arrived, breathless, from her shearing, “what set the dogs off like that?”

“Something appeared in the port,” Angela answered, “but it's gone now.”

Jimbo, rashly perhaps, took the dogs to the port and unlocked the cage, while the three women stood back watching. The dogs snuffled all about the south-facing portal, giving a low whining sound as they circled crazily around within it. With the dogs safely out, he locked the cage again saying, “something unknown to the dogs was in there. Something that had to have pressed the button to get away. What did you see, exactly?”

“Just a black heap, motionless in the bottom of the portal,” Margaret replied. “I didn't see it make

any movement either," Maureen added.

"Let's go back, quickly," said Jimbo, as the three women hurried after him.

Back in the kitchen that evening, after Donald had returned and they had dined, the four discussed the new event.

"Something was in the portal while the light was red," Donald answered to the description of events, "and that something had to have pressed the button to leave when the light went back to blue. There is no other way to trigger a travel port."

"Exactly," added Jimbo. "It must have been a vampire. Cringing from the daylight under something like a black tarpaulin sheet."

"With one hand up near the button in case of discovery," Donald continued. "Hit the button and gone to the port that was last visited from this one. With the hand still ready to press again if in trouble there. Press and press again until out of danger."

"The bag did appear to be stretched upwards into the corner of the booth," Angela agreed, "but it looked empty."

"Shows an incredible level of planning and subterfuge for a vampire," Jimbo acknowledged. "To crouch down under the cover with one hand up ready near the button like that."

Angela shivered. "Without the cage round the portal we could have been attacked. That blackness, whatever it is, appears to protect it from the strength of the sun."

"The tell-tale was in the changing colour of the

light, though," Donald pointed out. "Without that you may not even have noticed a black sack lying in the bottom of the portal through the shadows from the grille."

"That and the strange reaction of the dogs," Margaret agreed.

Early the next morning, Billy the boatman was back. He called all the men to a higher point behind the castle and pointed to the mainland. "I've got a bay across there, about 14 miles away, that I operate from, with a bit of a land base, an old boathouse. There is a MegaTom port nearby, but they have smashed it up. Nothing works. Anyway, I stay offshore at night in the boat. Well, up on the headland there, about 12 miles from here, I can hear them each night. They were all along the top of the cliffs, last night, moaning and howling and grunting at each other. My dogs were whining with the noise and I thought they were after me again in the launch at first. Then, looking through my binoculars, I realised they were watching something farther out to sea. I'm afraid it was your lights on this island. They can hear the smithy and see the lights, so they know that there are people here for sure. Now, what they can do to get here I don't know, but you should all be on your guard."

"Why would they bother to attack us here?" Jimbo asked. "I just don't see the point, we are so few."

"They have completely cleared this corner of the mainland. Some of them use the ports to move on, but most are afraid of the portals. They have

emptied the surroundings of all the animals and people and are getting hungry. Your island must look like a feast to them. Sheep, goats, deer, people, even dogs... I bet they can smell each one of you from over there when the wind's blowing from the north-west."

As they were walking back to the lighthouse Jimbo was very quiet. Finally, he said, "the wind's in the wrong direction. It's too much to the south. They can't smell us from right over there."

"That bit was a joke, I think," Donald replied, "but it is a horror to be told they are planning to invade the island. Still, the portals are caged and it's twelve miles by boat and we skip the nights. So, what can they do to us?"

"Better not say too much to the women, though," Jimbo added, "Angela's close to cracking up, again. She just can't take the pressure of it all closing in on us like this again."

However, when they arrived back at the lighthouse, Margaret and Angela had no trouble sensing that something was wrong, and the men had to tell them everything that Billy had said not to leave them imagining even worse things.

To calm down speculation, and ease Angela's stress, Jimbo said, "listen, I'll pop down to the port and jump forward two weeks and have a look to make sure everything's alright. Don't worry, I won't be seen, I'll set it for dawn when we'll be skipping."

His return uphill was much slower than his run down to the port.

"I couldn't dial either port," he confessed, "Not

for two weeks ahead or even one. So, by then, presumably, the ports will both be out of action."

PART 2

In the morning, two days later, as the two couples arrived back at the lighthouse from the southern port after skipping the night, they couldn't miss the fact that the blue light had stopped shining on top of the northern portal. When they had all walked the mile to investigate they found that the light had been smashed during the night. That very useful, tell-tale sign of it being in use was gone. The lock on the cage, however was sound and nothing else had been damaged within the MegaTom unit.

As the other three began to walk back towards the lighthouse, with the dogs playing around them, Angela lingered, lost in thought, looking absently at the roughly shorn sheep that were cropping grass along the edge of the northern cliffs. Soundlessly, something black appeared in the portal.

Angela gasped with surprise, as it caught the corner of her eye. She turned. "Who are you? What do you want?" she whispered loudly, in an aside, at the apparition.

Amazingly, she was answered, "Vlad hungry."

"But why do you come here?"

“Blood is life.”

“But we are so few,” Angela pleaded.

“Have animals too,” the blackness said. “Only blood can be food for Vlad.”

At that moment there were shouts from Jimbo and Donald who were running back across the grass with the dogs yapping before them. Angela looked up quickly at the sound of their approach but when she turned back to the cage, the portal was empty.

“It was Vlad,” she explained, as if he was an everyday visitor, “and I've got a whopping headache.”

That evening after dinner, before the one hour alarm, the talk was in full swing. Angela felt better after her encounter and was talking about it.

“The important point,” Angela was insisting, “is that Vlad can work the ports to go wherever he wants. He knew he was coming here, it's not just random porting around. He must use the local settings to aim himself, so only the cages round the portals have stopped him. He has been here during the night, and has managed to destroy the blue light from inside the cage. He has looked around through the bars, and knows we have animals on the island. But, I don't think he can understand time-travel. He must keep the local time settings on zero. He probably doesn't know we are not in the house during the nights.”

The next morning Donald and Jimbo went across to see John the blacksmith in the castle keep. There was now a brass bell to ring hanging outside the two-storey high railings which most effectively cut

off entry to the open end of the U-shaped building and hence the only doors into it. Dogs barked and John came out to greet them. He locked the gates behind himself and the three walked some way off. After Donald had told him about the new appearances of Vlad and the damage to the blue light, which could not be seen from the castle's position, he suggested that perhaps the Blacksmiths should skip as well. John took a firm stance on that matter.

"I will not have my family driven out of here by any threat. Not for ever or even just for one night. We won't leave the place - night attack or not. As we have set up the keep, no invading vampire is going to get through to us, not even Vlad, himself, who, incidentally, I thought was just a myth. Are you sure your Angela didn't fall asleep, and dream him, Donald?"

Donald was thick-skinned and laughed as he said goodbye, but Jimbo was hurt for Angela's sake and put his head down as they turned and walked back.

"Don't take John the wrong way, he's a good worker," Donald said soothingly, but Jimbo, who wasn't any kind of worker, was still smarting from the sting.

That evening the talk round the table was centred on skipping the nights.

"We know from my failed attempt to look a week into the future that they will attack the ports soon," Jimbo said, "before the week is out they will not work. Vlad, I suppose, will return and smash them completely to stop us from escaping from the

island."

"But if he did that he would be trapped inside the cage with no way out." Angela pointed out. "I don't think Vlad is going to smash a port unless he knows he can break out of the cage around it."

"If he came with a sledge hammer," Donald put in, "he could smash the lock off. We built those cages to stop mindless vampires, not armed, thinking ones."

"We haven't thought this through," Margaret added. "When both ports are destroyed, we will not be able to skip the nights here and will be trapped on this island at night. How will we defend ourselves? What can they do to get at us? Is this lighthouse safe enough? Mind you, if they smash the ports, they won't be able to use them, either, so they won't be able to come here in force. Unless of course they smash them after they are all here, but then they wouldn't be able to leave the island and will eventually starve to death here. Not that that would help us any, unless "Vlad" can foresee that far ahead and plan to avoid it."

At that moment the hour alarm sounded but they talked on until the half-hour and then the four broke up to get ready for the night skip.

As each of them washed and dressed for the outdoors the light began to fade as the sun ran into a bank of cloud low on the horizon. It was a grim walk they took down the path to the southern portal with its blue light glowing in the approaching darkness, but their spirits lifted as they heard the normality of hammering and banging coming from

the brightly lit smithy in the castle keep further on down ahead of them.

"John, Peter and Paul are hard at it," said Donald as they reached the portal and Jimbo unlocked the cage. Jimbo dialled up the next morning on the local controls but the machine refused the setting. He tried again.

"What's wrong?" asked Angela, as a cold wave ran down her spine."

"It's not taking it," replied Jimbo, flatly.

"Oh, no!" spat Margaret, "let me try."

Margaret pushed into the booth as Jimbo withdrew, setting the necessary time and place on the Absolute Counter. "I never lose track of our absolute settings," she threw over her shoulder. Even so, her settings were also rejected. Angela was close to hysteria.

"We have two choices," Donald took control. "Obviously, they are coming tonight. Either we use the port, now, to run somewhere else – anywhere away from here, and risk ending up in a worse state, or we go back to the lighthouse and sit out the night and whatever it brings, as John the blacksmith and family are going to do. We still have our weapons and the dogs."

"How many will come?" asked Jimbo.

"Once the first one comes through the port and smashes out of the cage, any number could follow him, fifty, a hundred even."

Angela started screaming. "Smash the portal, James! Just smash it! Before they can use it to get

here."

"Yes," added Margaret, "Donald, I'm ordering you to smash that thing. Quickly, now, I'm serious."

"What about food?" Jimbo asked, feeling boxed into a corner.

"Well, don't smash the other three parts, of course, don't be ridiculous. Just the travel port, to stop the vampires arriving," Angela threw at him with contempt.

With that Donald and Jimbo unsheathed their hefty knives and destroyed all the controls on the board and the translucent glass panel in the ceiling of the booth which was part of its functioning, and after managing to rip off the unlocked cage door with great effort and leverage from their poles, they stuffed it at an angle into the booth, blocking the standing space. The light on top had turned red.

"There," said Margaret, satisfied, "now the other one. I haven't forgotten that only the light was broken, Vlad appeared in the cage in front of Angela after that."

Half an hour later, in patchy moonlight, both travel ports had been utterly destroyed.

"Perhaps," said Jimbo, very quietly, as his brain was completely overwhelmed with an appalling thought, "perhaps they were not coming tonight after all. Listen. We thought that they were definitely coming tonight because the southern portal wouldn't work for tomorrow morning, but now we have destroyed the portal, ensuring that it won't work for tomorrow morning, whether the vampires are coming or not."

As they returned home, feeling deflated, to the lighthouse, the two men agreed to stand a watch each through the night. Watches that turned out to be uneventful after the destruction of the ports.

Early next morning John the blacksmith was banging on the door and pointing out the destruction of the southern port. Donald had to admit that they had wrecked both and why, and John, worried that his customer base would never be able to contact him again, left in a huff. Donald ate breakfast quickly and disappeared “to do jobs.”

Down the slope towards the castle keep a fire blazed up and started smoking heavily. Jimbo went with Angela, who wouldn't be left behind, to see what was happening. John the blacksmith had lit a signal fire on the clifftop facing the mainland, a fire which had been pre-arranged to call Billy the boatman over to the island if all other communication failed, as it now had. John had calmed down a bit from his understandable huff, and was prepared to explain his thinking to Jimbo.

“Without any MegaTom port to link to the mainland, I'll need a boat to ferry myself across to a coffee shop on the hill, where I can continue to conduct my business. That is if the vampires have left it in one piece. I know the owners skip the nights and leaves three big, bad dogs inside to bark and snarl and bite anything that goes near the place. I have taken both my pairs from them as puppies. Anyway, when Billy can get here I'll ask him to take me over there to see if we can find a sizeable boat I can use for the smithy.”

Not wishing to leave Margaret alone in the lighthouse for too long Jimbo muttered some wishes to John and the couple walked back up the hill. Donald was still away “doing things” so the three sat down to the lunch that Angela had taken from the food portal as they had passed by it on the way back.

Evening was approaching as Donald reappeared and went straight to wash for dinner.

“Sorry,” he answered to Margaret's complaints, “been at it all day. I'm famished.”

“John the blacksmith stopped short of cursing us and has lit a fire above the jetty to attract Billy with his boat,” Jimbo informed him. “He wants Billy to help him to get a boat of his own.”

“I saw the fire from the boathouse,” Donald replied. “It did look like a signal, but I didn't have time to pop up and ask him about it during the day.”

“But what have you been doing all day then?” Margaret asked.

“Hopefully, nothing useful,” Donald answered cryptically.

The one-hour-to-dark alarm rang.

“Well, there's no need for that any more,” commented Jimbo. “There's no port for us now, but perhaps we should keep them going to avoid getting too complacent and forget the time.”

“Yes, we need them to follow the time just as much now that we have to lock ourselves in, as before when we were skipping the nights,” Angela agreed.

“But why do we have to be so careful now?” Margaret asked. “After all, the vampires can't get here without a working port.”

“After what's been said by Billy and after what animalistic noises I was pretty sure I could hear last night through the windows from the mainland and after what I've seen with the binoculars, today, I'm not so sure,” Donald replied. “I'll get the dogs in and lock up.”

With their two original dogs inside and the other four on running chains on the outside, Donald and Jimbo carved up the night watches again between them. Jimbo would take the first watch as Donald was dog tired from his “business” that had kept him away the whole day.

While Jimbo, guarding the only door from the outside, paced up and down the corridor between the lighthouse and the keeper's quarters, he extended his shift to give Donald more sleep. Imaginary horrors lurked in every corner and shadow. Every sound was the harbinger of an attack. Only the presence of the attentive dogs at his feet kept him from completely losing his objectivity. The night wore on. It was an hour before dawn, when Jimbo, hoping the night was too far gone, was seized by a blind panic that crept slowly up his spine, until in the end it was choking him. He rushed up the winding stairs of the lighthouse, dogs on his heels, as much to burn off adrenaline as to achieve anything. Panting at the top, he looked out into the darkness, a haunted man, pursued by the horrors of his own fears and imagination. Off to the south-east, where the castle keep, and hidden down

the cliff below it, the jetty were, he became aware of some disturbance. As he couldn't hear clearly from the sealed lighthouse windows he ran back down, along the corridor and then up again to the first floor of the keeper's quarters and there, releasing the internal shutters, threw open the window.

The crescent moon had risen eastwards showing the silhouette of the top of the castle just over half a mile away with many figures climbing the stone walls of the sides picked out in detail. Although the wind was from the south-west, as always, snarls, screams, shouts and barks could clearly be heard.

Jimbo ran and woke Donald, they woke the women and all four rapidly dressed in outdoor clothing.

“There is no time to loose,” whispered Donald as they assembled at the bottom of the stairs, “this way.”

He led them to the lounge window that faced north-west, out to sea, away from the castle and the mainland, and throwing open the shutters, opened the window.

“Quickly,” he ordered, “up on the settee and out the window. There's a table with a mattress on it below to help you down. Make no sound, our lives depend upon it.”

Jimbo went first to help the women down. It wasn't too far. Then came Margaret and Angela and then Donald threw the two dogs down to Jimbo and climbed out.

“Quietly now,” Donald said, as he pushed the

window shut and jumped down. “We have to go straight to the top of the cliff and then turn right and head north, but stay low as you run, we mustn't be seen.”

As they reached the ragged cliff edge and turned north and were no longer covered from the castle by the lighthouse, diminishing sounds of the fight at the castle reached them, now reduced to snarling, groaning and whining.

“Keep running,” Donald implored, “they'll be coming after us next. Follow the edge until you see a small path going down.”

It was a heart-bursting run of almost half a mile before the low wall next to the downward path showed itself in the moonlight. The dogs were off, snuffling away, straight down without any instruction. As the four people dropped below the level of the top of the cliffs new sounds came to their ears. Their other dogs chained outside the lighthouse had started howling, then growling and barking until after whining and yelping they fell silent. Then the caged door was repeatedly hit, windows smashed, shutters ripped off. Blended with all these noises there came a sickening all-pervading background of inhuman snarling.

Jimbo led down the zigzag path until he reached the old cannon emplacement at the bottom that had once been a part of the fog warning system for boats out at sea.

“To the left,” said Donald, puffing up to him. The women were looking at him, pleadingly as they lent on the wall for support. “No time to rest,

there's a rope going over the side, that's it, use it for support and balance as you climb on downwards towards the sea."

The four went over the stone guard wall in turns, while the dogs, having already jumped it, were off down for the new adventure. Hand over hand, holding the rope, they moved backwards down the rocky slope, still panting from the run, hands smarting from the roughness of the rope. Steadily they descended, left, right, left, right, until Donald whispered from the back. "Almost there, can you see the dinghies, James?"

Turning to look behind him, Jimbo saw in the starlight their two dingies upturned on the rocks and shingle where nature had tried to create a tiny bay. "Yes," he whispered back.

Suddenly, there came snorting noises from up on the cliff directly above them. They all froze in place – waiting. The snorting continued, trying to sniff them out, but nothing showed silhouetted in the light from the moon. Then one of the dogs got a whiff of something bad on the air and barked.

Donald threw aside all caution and rushed to the first boat, flipped it over in no time and pushed it into the sea. Jimbo was some way slower in getting the other turned over and into the water, and Margaret and Donald were already in the first boat. As Jimbo held the bow Angela climbed unsteadily into the second. Jimbo pushed off, paddling in the water and jumping in in one motion, a feat he wouldn't have believed possible a day before. As they scraped away from the stony shore the dogs,

looking upwards, started growling and snarling. Donald called them and they both leapt into Jimbo's dinghy as it floated free.

A crashing sound came down to them as six or seven vampires could be seen in silhouette, against the sky, leaping over the wall at the gun emplacement.

“Row,” shouted Donald, already pulling out from the shore, “row as if your lives depended on it.”

With Angela in the bow, the two dogs on the bottom of the boat by her feet, Jimbo set the oars in the rowlocks and pulled with all his might.

“Don't look back,” shouted Donald to the two women, but Jimbo couldn't avoid it. As he pulled away with the oars, looking directly astern at the island, the first two vampires arrived at the water's edge. A picture of horror, they hesitated for a split second and launched themselves, into the air, at Jimbo's boat. One missed completely, hit the water and went quickly under but the other managed a hand hold on the top of the transom. As Jimbo kept pulling away at the oars, staring at the hand, hoping the thing would let go, he saw a movement from the corner of his eye, something flashed out and there was a sickening crunch. Angela had reached round him and hit the gripping knuckles with a wooden marlin-spike that had been stowed in the bow. The hand had disappeared.

More vampires had arrived at the edge of the sea, but the two dinghies were too far away. The first vampire to have jumped in was managing to crawl back out of the water, half-drowned. The others

descended upon him in their frustration, tearing at him, biting him and ripping his remnant clothes off his back, chewing hard on his bony form. Blood flowed copiously down him. The grunting and sucking and slurping noises were too much for Angela, sat back in the bow staring out to sea, and she put her head down and her hands over her ears and screamed quietly into her lap. Jimbo, forced to watch, could only think that that would have been their fate if they had been five seconds slower.

Donald and Jimbo continued to pull on the oars until they were a hundred yards out and the boats were beginning to separate.

"Catch a line," Donald shouted to Jimbo. "Tie it to the bow ring. Let's not drift apart now."

So Jimbo took the rope and tied it off while Donald gradually pulled the two boats closer to each other. When the second boat was ten feet from his, Donald tied the rope off at the stern.

"Now, even if we sleep, we can drift north with the tide," he explained, "without getting separated."

From the northern end of the island the sounds of the sheep and goats squealing and shrieking as they were attacked floated down to them. Jimbo was pulling the two boats side-by-side.

Angela, who had lifted her head as she had heard her father's voice cried out, "they've got to the animals, now. It's horrible. What happened to John and Maureen and the boys?"

"They were overrun," said Donald. "The vampires just climbed the stone block walls of the castle and smashed their way into the upper floors.

I think some even went in through holes they ripped through the roof. John's railings were useless. The dogs were circumvented and uselessly barking up at them. They were probably all dead before we even knew of the attack."

"It's too terrible to consider," Margaret put in, from her bow seat. "But, Donald, you must have known they were coming, to have so carefully set in place such a complete escape route, in time for tonight?"

The four were seated in a square now, with the two boats touching sides, rocking gently, the two women in the bows and the two men on the central thwarts, all facing each other. The dogs remained at Angela's feet. It was like they were back sat around the kitchen table, talking, only horribly different.

"I didn't know anything for sure," Donald replied, "I just wanted to be capable of a quick getaway, if it was required."

"Well, it certainly was," Jimbo added, "if we had been a few seconds slower..."

"It took all day to bring the dinghies round from the boathouse, stock them soundly so they could be inverted without losing anything and set up the length of rope down that final bit of cliff. I didn't expect to be using them so soon, though."

"It has saved our lives," said Angela, "there is no doubt about that, but couldn't we have saved John's family as well?"

"He wouldn't have it," Donald replied. "I liked John a lot, and told him what I reckoned and intended to do, but he wouldn't hear of it, wouldn't

enter a plan to abandon the castle and his smithy he had set up there. He believed they could defend it against any vampire attack. Couldn't imagine they would simply scale the walls, lift the tiles and jump straight in through the roof."

For some time as the other three were talking, Jimbo had been watching, through the blackness, something sizeable floating on the water, some way off. As the conversation lapsed, he asked, "what is that over there?"

Donald saw it for what it was immediately. "That's Billy's launch," he said.

"Oh, no! What are we going to do?" cried Margaret. "They've come to get us. They're after us in a bigger boat. We're finished now, Donald."

Donald hadn't taken his eyes off the launch and replied, "it looks abandoned, though. It's not moving under command, it's just drifting with the tide and the wind like we are."

Pushing off against the other dinghy, Donald started rowing towards the launch which was about a hundred and fifty yards south-west of them and further out to sea. Jimbo took up his oars and as the rope tightened between the two boats started to row in tandem with the leading boat. As they approached Billy's launch an inhuman snarling could be heard coming from it.

"They're in there. Oh, Donald! Let's not get too close," cried Margaret, who, sitting in the bow of the first dinghy, was nearest to the launch.

"Ahoy. Who's there?" shouted Donald.

The snarling intensified and a shape appeared rising up from the bottom of the boat. The dogs started whining as the second dinghy came up beside the other.

“It's Billy, or what used to be Billy,” said Donald sadly. “See the bites? He's been bitten all over, tortured. He's infected now, but they must have forced him to sail them to the island before they bit into him. I bet he did his level best to take it as slowly as possible to kill them with the daylight out here on the water, that's why they didn't get here until nearly dawn.”

“So that's how they got to the island,” Jimbo mused, “but now they are trapped on it. They have no MegaTom port or boat.”

“Of course,” added Donald, running things through in his mind, “as they arrived at the jetty and started jumping off, each one of them gave Billy an extra bite as a reward, but none of them thought of tying up the boat, so it just carried on rounding the island and ended up out here.”

“It's a shame for Billy, but a better deal than these dinghies for us,” Jimbo continued his musing, “it has a small cabin.”

The vampire that had been Billy the boatman had continued its growling and snarling directed towards the smaller boats.

“I hate to have to, but let's do it,” said Donald, telling Margaret and Jimbo to exchange boats. Then he gingerly pulled the first boat up to the launch. “Use the oar,” he directed to Jimbo, passing one to him.

Together, with an oar apiece, Donald and Jimbo thrust the two oars at what had been Billy, both of which he instinctively grabbed onto and fixed in his hands. Then they pushed him backwards to unbalance him and then jerked him towards them and over the side of the launch into the sea between the boats.

“Push him down,” said Donald grimly, “and hold him under.”

Quite soon, the force on the oars was released, and they were able to draw them back into the dinghy. Both Angela and Margaret were verging on hysteria seeing their men deliberately drowning their ex-friend.

“Sorry,” said Jimbo to Angela.

“It was a shame, but it had to be done,” added Donald. “The vampires must have dealt with his two dogs at the outset. Anyway, the sun or starvation would have finished him soon, out here on his own.”

“We know,” said Margaret, crying, “but that didn't make it any easier to watch you doing what you had to do.”

Donald, approaching again, shouted, “Ahoy,” at the launch, and having no reply, with one oar started prodding inside Billy's boat, while Jimbo stood guard with the other. Nothing stirred. Finally, he eased himself into the launch and Jimbo followed. The fear of the unknown, a cold dread in the darkness, for each of them, at that moment in the lingering stench, was even greater than their fear when they were running along the clifftop. Donald

poked inside the small cabin. Nothing. He carefully looked in. Still nothing.

"It's alright," he said, "it's empty," and four hearts started to beat again.

Angela and Margaret insisted on clearing out all the noxious things from the previous occupants. The work helped them to burn off some of the adrenaline accumulated with the terror, while Donald and Jimbo tied off the two dinghies, one long and one short, to cleats on the corners of the transom and drew them in, starting to unload the dogs and the gear Donald had stowed in them. When the work was finished they dropped the anchor and sat in their customary square on the longitudinal benches, Donald opened the talk.

"I had imagined we would be able to ride out the night on the sea in the dingies if it wasn't too rough and then return during the day to clear them out, one by one, with the poles and ropes," he said. "But that's not possible, there are too many of them and they are just too capable."

"We've lost the island to them," Margaret sobbed, "there's just no way of going back to it now. Anyway, the ports are useless, all the animals must be dead, the victors by now will be scattered all over the island getting ready to hide from the sun."

"There will be an extra four vampires, now, as well," Jimbo added, remembering the blacksmith family.

Angela was in tears. "What can we do? If a storm blows up we will be finished. We can't stay in the boat, the mainland's awash with them and the

island's been taken over."

"Well, I did have an emergency plan," Donald began. "A plan of desperation, if all else failed."

"Tell us, then," Margaret begged.

"Due north of us, just off the Welsh mainland is another small island. I found it in my book of maps. I had imagined it very unlikely that we could sail there in the two dinghies, but this launch will make it easier. It's about thirty miles away."

"How long would it take?" asked Margaret.

"Six or seven hours, probably," Donald replied, "the wind should be with us."

"Will it be safe?" Angela asked.

"That we won't know until we get there," was all Donald could reply, "its quite small." Then he added, "but it does have one MegaTom port, if it's still operational. But right now, I suggest we ride on the anchor and get some rest. You two girls take the cabin and James and I will stay on watch until the sun comes up. It won't be very long, though."

As dawn, quite soon, began to break over the island, just Jimbo was on watch, and Angela who couldn't really sleep with the rocking of the boat and after such a night of tension had come out to replace her father.

"It looks so peaceful," she said wistfully, as the rising sun silhouetted the island before them. Jimbo was looking all around at the sea which was perhaps becoming choppier, and at the sky which was reddening with the sunrise.

"Look there's smoke. The smithy must have

caught fire in the night. We should be starting, I think," was all he could reply.

On hearing voices, Margaret emerged from the cabin, followed by Donald, yawning.

"Let's be going," said Donald. "It's too painful to be so near to what we used to call home."

Margaret busied herself feeding the dogs and putting together a breakfast from the provisions Donald had stored in the dinghies, while Donald and Jimbo tried to get the sail into some shape for the voyage before weighing anchor. Angela just stared over the side of the boat at the smoke rising above the island as the light increased.

"Look!" exclaimed Angela, making everyone jump, "there's someone on the roof of the lighthouse."

There, in front of the wafting column of smoke, straddling the central ball on top of the lighthouse roof and above the now broken, sightless windows of the tower, was a form in silhouette. Shrouded by a piece of thick, black tarpaulin held up behind it from the rays of the rising sun, there stood a figure watching them. It was oddly magnified in the moist, rising atmosphere and backlit morning glow, taking on a superhuman aspect.

"I feel some strange affinity towards that figure," said Angela absently. Then shaking herself, added, "it must be Vlad. He has some kind of link with us. But we have slipped through his net."

"I don't think you ought to look, then," replied Jimbo, feeling something, from the tone in her voice, akin to jealousy, as if that boy/man/monster

on the roof could be a rival for her affection.

Donald had managed to spread the sail and the wind gently filled it, as taking the tiller he steered them away to the north, allowing first their lighthouse and then their whole island to fall silently behind them.

“Ha! He'll never get off the island, now,” said Jimbo, a bit spitefully. “We have the only three boats, and both MegaTom ports are broken. He'll starve in the end.”

Angela let it pass.

On the journey, as the launch pretty much sailed itself, while the women rested in the cabin, Jimbo and Donald talked.

“Have you heard of “The Wall,” asked Jimbo.

“Only that it is the only way out of MegaTom,” said Donald. “Other than death, that is. In fact, as it has been described to me, it is in all ways equivalent to death. Like committing suicide.”

“Yes, almost,” Jimbo replied. “Yet, you know? The more the idea sinks into me, the more I believe that my father did not go to ZeroSecond that last time, when he disappeared, but decided instead to go over The Wall.”

“That,” threw Angela, who had been listening from the cabin, “could never have been a conscious decision, only a stupid mistake.”

The conversation ended there.

Through the day, the line on the sea ahead of them steadily grew as they approached the southern coast, and they eventually discovered that the island

hardly stood out from the mainland at all. It was at the extreme end of a large bay, only about half a mile off the main coast.

“There is a small sandy beach on the western side,” said Donald, as they approached the island. “It's more isolated I think. We"ll drop anchor a little way off and if it looks safe we'll use one of the dinghies to get to the beach.”

“There's enough daylight left, I hope,” mused Jimbo looking at the position of the sun. “Where is the MegaTom port?”

“Right in the middle of the island, as far as I know,” answered Donald, “about half a mile from this beach. There is also a lighthouse. I thought we could examine that for possibilities.”

Margaret and Angela elected to stay in the launch after their harrowing run to safety of the night before, especially as Angela's bump was growing, but Donald and Jimbo insisted that they go with them rather than split the group, just leaving the dogs behind. After seeing no movement, they took one of the dinghies and rowed to the beach. Pulling the boat up on the sand, they surveyed the area but nothing untoward showed – no signs of mass mayhem. The men had armed themselves with knives, sticks and ropes as usual.

Climbing the gentlest of the slopes away from the shore took them, eventually, to the top of the cliff overlooking the beach and brought them to a high point on the island. The lighthouse could be seen to the south about a mile away, but half that distance, to the East, was a cluster of buildings in the centre

of the island near to which the blue light of a working MegaTom port glowed. They chose the nearer.

Arriving at the port without incident, they each took food and drink and verified that the travel and medical portals were operational. Angela tried to have her pregnancy confirmed but was not given a new diagnosis or set of supplements. Bothered by this failure of the medical port they walked to the nearest cottage hoping for a bit of rest, but in the overgrown garden, under a smashed window, was a length of shiny, black rope, glistening redly in the setting sun.

“That's quite fresh,” said Donald, “last night's by the look of it. We're finished, it's almost dark. We'll never get back to the boat in time.”

They were each, individually, aware that with the sound of their voices some growling and snarling could be heard coming from inside the house.

“Not again!” groaned Angela. “Is there no peace for us?”

“Quickly,” said Jimbo, “lets get to the portal, it's our only hope of escape.”

The four of them hurried back to the MegaTom port as the last rays of the sun left the sky. The inhuman noises were certain and more now, coming from many of the houses. Heads, no longer hiding from the sun, were appearing in doorways and windows – vile, hungry heads, supported by vile, hungry bodies.

“Where can we port to?” begged Angela.

“They could be anywhere or everywhere,” added Donald.

“Just get us out of here,” Margaret cried.

“I'll set it,” said Jimbo fiddling with the settings. “Just press the button, jump out quickly at the other end and wait.”

A horde was gathering now and coming across the grass at them. First Margaret, then Angela, then Donald entered the port and vanished and finally Jimbo, as the fastest of the vampires were rushing at him.

PART 3

Wherever each of the four imagined they would be, nothing could prepare them for where they actually were.

They had walked out into a paved outside courtyard bounded by brightly lit, concrete and glass buildings that reached far up into the sky. The oddly designed portal they had arrived in was just one in a row behind them. Four people in white coats stood before them, and one, a woman holding a clipboard approached. She looked at Donald's and Jimbo's knives, sticks and ropes.

“Were you being chased by vampires?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Jimbo, the only responsive member of the group.

“How many? More than a few?”

“Probably. We didn't wait to see,” apologised Jimbo.

“Follow me,” said the woman, moving to the nearest building.

She led them in through a sliding door, as a sound of snarling and slobbering began in the courtyard behind them.

Jimbo, the only one daring to look back, reported, “they use nets,” as the noise turned into rage and frustration as the daylight disoriented the vampires one by one as they were disgorged by the portal and captured by some efficient looking trappers.

“You will have to join this queue,” said the woman in white, “we have been inundated with refugees from MegaTom. I am afraid our usual systems just can't cope. Don't worry,” she smiled seeing the look on Angela's face, “somebody will see you soon.”

“Where are we?” asked Angela in a whisper, seeing more people in front of her than she had ever seen in her life before.

“On an impulse,” Jimbo began sheepishly, “I just dialled all the nines on the absolute time settings, and, well... Here we are.”

“You've sent us over the Wall?” asked Donald, not yet fully recovered from the change of surroundings.

“What wall?” asked Margaret.

“The wall at the end of MegaTom's time zone,” Donald explained coming back to himself, “the only setting in MegaTom without a return. At the end of the 30,000 years comes the final second. If you go there, time will naturally count onwards and take you beyond the reach of MegaTom. As the last second becomes last-second-plus-one, you are out of the system. Gone. We have all gone over the Wall!”

“James, why did you do that?” demanded Angela, not quite understanding the point.

“When we arrived at the port, with the vampires coming,” Jimbo explained, “I didn't know what to dial up. We've heard that the vampires seem to be everywhere. So, on impulse I put the Wall, and off we went.”

“Or, rather, off we came,” put in Margaret, “came completely off the map. So we can never return to our lives now.”

“No,” agreed Angela, “but whatever happens to us here, I think our lives <u>there</u> were well and truly finished, anyway.”

The queue moved quickly, and soon they were approached by a man in a white coat.

“One of you follow me,” he said.

“But we're a family,” Donald responded.

“Is this your woman?” the man asked, pointing to Margaret.

“Yes.”

“Then you and she can come with me,” he said.

“No visitors, I'm afraid. No room. You will be able to meet up again in the canteen later. It won't take long.”

With hasty good-byes, Margaret and Donald were whisked away, but very soon a woman took Angela and Jimbo to a curtained booth. One in a row of twenty or so. Inside was a flat glass bed.

“That's a diagnostic couch,” explained Angela to Jimbo. “They had them where I went to be diagnosed when losing our previous baby.”

“This is where you came,” said the woman. “All diagnoses from MegaTom are done here, but they will explain it all to you in the seminar at the canteen.”

After their diagnoses, where Angela being healthy and four months pregnant, was given some new supplements and Jimbo being healthy but unfit, was given an exercise regime and some tonic to take daily, they were released and shown the way to the canteen. Such a huge building with so many sign-posted twists and turns was beyond Jimbo's wildest nightmares. Apart from the lighthouse, he had never seen anything higher than two storeys, nor with more than eight rooms. The endless corridors were filled with endless side-corridors of innumerable, identical booths. Everything was faced in a smooth, high-gloss white, lit from above by diffused white light.

Gradually, by following the signs, they arrived at the canteen and found Donald and Margaret just taking a tray and heading for a bank of machines that looked and worked like MegaTom food ports.

Joining in the flow, they were soon able to follow the older couple to one of the few empty tables. There appeared to Jimbo to be at least a thousand people in the hall, and he felt uneasy and unable to cope, being unaccustomed to such a large gathering.

“Don't worry,” said Angela. “Just look at their faces, they're all as lost and confused as we are.”

Angela shared their medical results with her parents. Then Margaret told them that they were both fine, but that Donald had a bit of tightening of his vessels and had raised blood pressure and so some pills, and that she, Margaret, was “understandably” having a touch of nervous tension, and some other pills to ease it.

“They told us the seminar will start again shortly,” Donald added. “It's just to explain the situation to new arrivals.”

With that, as if on cue, a large screen on the back wall came to life, and the giant image of a man appeared.

“Welcome to our medical centre. Because you have dialled up the end-wall on a MegaTom port, you have been directed to your nearest Control Centre medical unit. As you will have experienced, we are fully dedicated to the health of all our patients. What you may not know, however, is that this is one of a large number of similar establishments around the world that treat the people living within MegaTom. In fact, our main work involves keeping those people healthy. Anyone entering a medical port that is within our area at any time within the 30,000 years that the

system runs will be remotely examined from here and then either sent the relevant diagnosis and medicines or be ported here for a more lengthy treatment. Anyone brought here is sent back to a point in time one second after they entered, so the results may appear miraculous to others who accompany them to the portal. Although we concern ourselves within the boundaries of MegaTom, we are outside its influence. You are no longer under its sway. There are no portals for free movement in space or time here. You are, incidentally, free to leave and go out into the world of this era whenever you wish, if that is why you dialled the Wall. The world in this time has recovered from the stresses of the three phases that existed before MegaTom as the daily energy, food and other necessities are provided by duplicators.

"All the facilities made available under MegaTom are operated from this Centre. Apart from the medical buildings, we also have the clothing and equipment, and food and drink buildings. All are so vast that, coming from MegaTom, as you mostly do, they will seem impossibly large at first and impossibly difficult to negotiate. Necessarily, beyond this hub of operational facilities are many towering blocks of residential units for our staff and visitors, each with their own shops, gyms and school crèches.

"When MegaTom was devised, it was decided by the planners that the operational hubs should exist outside the Space/Time/Mind continuum that MegaTom would reside in. So, as the world at that time was in shambles after the three Phases, the

logical place for these hubs was immediately after the end of MegaTom. The world of then was scoured for doctors, nurses, nutritionist, clothiers, administrators and operators to set-up and keep the systems running, after they had been created by the engineers. Acquiring new staff is a continuing process.

"The number of people engaged in this work is vast, and we would like to think that some of you may be prepared to join in with the operational running of the system. Doctors need the back up of technical staff to operate and maintain the medical scanners as well as nurses and auxiliary staff in the wards. The food and clothing portals are tended by an army of duplicator operators. Clerical work abounds at all levels and cleaners are always needed. Our specialist schools undertake the training of all potential staff."

The screen faded to black. A hush had fallen over the hall. Slowly the assembly came back to life as whispers were passed back and forth.

"Well, I wouldn't mind helping," said Angela, "they have supported us well enough all these years."

"True," answered Jimbo, "we have taken it all for granted. I couldn't have guessed there were so many thousands of people working behind the scenes."

"I think we must be <u>too</u> old," said Margaret with emphasis, giving a spiked look at Donald who was about to speak.

At that moment the screen sprang into life again.

A new face appeared.

"This is an update which we could not have imagined we would ever have had to broadcast. As you know all local MegaTom medical ports are dealt with at this facility. That is, from within the area we cover, at any time within the 30,000 years, all medical matters have been directed here, and have been allocated to a particular bed in a particular ward at a particular time by a system of electronic administration that I do not propose to enter into now. If a cure of the patient is effected, they are returned back to their own time and place.

"Of late, however, a new type of patient has appeared in our beds. A type we were not created to deal with. Vampires. In order to rid themselves of the problem without having to become killers, MegaTom dwellers are putting them into the medical ports, and as the automatic diagnostic systems cannot diagnose them, they pop out here. They create havoc in the wards and escape into the surrounding buildings seeking shade from the sun. At night they become an even greater danger, and some of our own workers have been bitten and joined the roaming bands which are sadly spreading out into the surrounding countryside.

"We desperately need people who have had some dealings with vampires to help get the plague under control before we are completely overwhelmed. You will be fully equipped with, what is hopefully, bite-proof leather suits, nets, electric cattle prods that can stun a vampire (or human, so be careful) and shackles. At the moment the unfortunate creatures are being rounded up and kept in a

darkened, underground detention centre, until a cure can be found. They are fed on animal blood which keeps them quiet most of the time. We have many scientists working around the clock on experiments to try to discover a suitable treatment.

"If you could help with this matter, and we understand that it is not to everyone's taste, please let us know."

"We've definitely had some experience," Donald said, before Margaret could manage to restrain him.

"Yes, and we have put a few into the medical ports, ourselves," Jimbo agreed.

"I suppose you ought to do it," Angela added, looking apologetically at Margaret, "they seem pretty desperate."

"Last night we were all running for our lives," Margaret argued, "from what we saw and heard then, I think it will take more than an electric cattle prod to get the better of them."

On their way out of the dining hall, white coated youngsters took down the groups particulars. As they had no objections, they were billeted together in a two bedroomed apartment D4 2307, which, as they were told, meant block D4, floor 23 (the top) and flat 7. Lifts as well as stairs went to all floors, they were also told in answer to Jimbo's astonished thought. Food, clothing and whatever else they would need was available from the "shop" which occupied nearly half of the ground floor with various booths similar to food and clothing portals. The walk to and from one's block to one's post in one of the centres was considered sacred as it

constituted the only daily activity in the fresh air for many of the employees under the stresses they now experienced, although exercise equipment and a small swimming pool were available on the other half of the ground floor of each block.

With no skills adaptable for clerical work, when it came to the question of helping out, Donald and Jimbo volunteered to join the vampire catchers, while Angela, for as long as she could before the birth, and Margaret, reluctantly, agreed to join the team that cleaned the cages where the vampires were kept. Equipped with suitable maps, keys, directions and times to report to their units the next morning, the four left the medical centre and entered the outside world, marvelling, as they followed their mapped route to block D4. Such towering structures were beyond their belief, they hadn't even lived near mountains to be able to accommodate the view of such vertical heights. All the blocks appeared to be falling onto them as they passed by them, wavering wildly off the vertical.

Once inside the flat, equipped with a few meals and a change of clothes from the ground floor, and once the vertigo from the motion of the high speed lift had worn off, they sat around the kitchen table to eat and felt almost as if nothing had changed from their days in the lighthouse. However, in the background each of them could feel the small, disconcerting sway of the block in the wind, and glimpsed from the window a panorama of distant fields and farm buildings stretching away twenty miles or more into the mists of the horizon where the outline of perhaps another control complex

could just be seen. A grand vista broken only by the verticality of nearby blocks similar to their own.

"I'm not sure if I did the right thing in bringing us here," said Jimbo looking vainly at the other three faces for encouragement, "but they do need our help," he finished lamely. When the others burst out laughing at him, he felt vindicated, and all four felt much easier with the night coming on and no more need to port to the next morning. What a joy to be able to sleep comfortably at night again.

The next morning they walked to the medical centre together before splitting up in pairs to go to their respective posts. Donald and Jimbo changed into the supplied leather suits and equipped themselves with cattle prods, nets, knives and leg shackles. They were posted in a square ward of more than two hundred beds in rows, with each bed fully surroundable by lightweight, ice-blue curtains. A white-coated doctor approached them.

"Not much of a job, I'm afraid," he said. "Most of the time nothing will be happening, but when it does we will be extremely glad of you here. When people put a vampire in a medical port, we have no warning – it just appears on one of the beds and creates havoc all around itself. The artificial lighting in here is not high enough to disable them. We had tried equipping guards with powerful hand torches, but the creatures just instinctively close their eyes or turn their backs to the light. The effect was minimal. Those prods you carry work on them like the sun – a jolt disrupts their nervous system, gives an intense shock to their brains that almost paralyses them and takes minutes to dissipate

completely.

"If one appears, it will start howling. Get to the bed as quickly as you can, stun it, net it, shackle it, and if no more arrive nearby, one of you should take it to the holding pens in the basement, while the other stays on watch. There are spare shackles in the lockers at the ends of each row of beds. Is that all clear?"

It was.

Meanwhile, Angela and Margaret, suitably dressed, were being taught the intricacies of cleaning the cages of the vampires with long-handled scrapers and scrubbing brushes and water hoses. The vampires were kept in darkened pens, fifty at a time. The pens were built with two extra internal sliding sides that could be used to push them all to one end or the other of the cage. While they were squeezed into one end, the other end could be scraped and brushed out from the accumulated slimy, black waste and hosed down into the surrounding gutters. No contact was to be made with the vampires and they were not expected to attempt to clean the creatures themselves. However, while the cleaning was going on at one end, they would snarl and growl and howl from behind the bars at the other, reaching out with their hands trying to grab the women. In the low, red light used not to upset the vampires, the effect was hellish.

Margaret's nerves were stretched by the unholy, harrowing scenes and noises and choking smell, but seeing Angela, in her condition, plodding on, she

tried to close her eyes and ears and nose to it all. As Angela had said to her at the beginning: “It needs doing. Somebody has to do it. This is a medical facility, they can't just kill them off any more than we could.” Each cage-end needed scraping out and hosing down at least twice a day, and there were many, many cages down there in the ruddy gloom.

During their debriefing round the kitchen table at the end of the day the four compared notes.

“Caught four of them today,” Donald would say.

“Found one hiding under the next door bed,” Jimbo would add.

“One of them screamed so loudly, I thought my eardrums had burst,” Angela would note.

“I slipped up in the filth, and had to go and shower,” Margaret would admit.

One evening Donald had something different to tell. “Talked with one of the supervisors today,” he recounted, “and he reckons it's a losing battle. There are more and more of them coming through to us. They are even talking of putting a night-time curfew in place, which will disrupt the shift systems, but they are losing doctors as they are ambushed walking home from the centre at night. We may have to be put on night patrol, as we have already had experience with vampires.”

Then, another evening Angela dropped a bombshell, which shook the other three to the core. “While I was hosing down today, above the sound of the hose and the growling, a voice called over to me. 'You!' it said. I looked over and it was one of the vampires. I couldn't believe it. A speaking

vampire? But there, dressed in his black leather covers, was Vlad peering at me. So I stopped hosing and approached him, but not too closely. 'Hello, Vlad,' I said, 'how did you manage to get off the island?' 'Vlad put Vlad in doctor's port.' he answered. 'Vlad is following you.' I was so taken aback, I stopped hosing all together and had to take a break. Could it be true, James? Is he really following us? Stalking us like that?"

"I wouldn't think so," said Jimbo, hoping he sounded convincing. "After all he didn't really follow us, we sailed to the other island and then went over the Wall. Completely otherwise, he came here, directly, through the medical port. It's just a coincidence we ended up at the same place at the same time. Funny thing though, him recognising and remembering you like that."

Margaret looked worried. "How far are you in the pregnancy?"

"Seven and a half months," Angela answered.

"Then I don't think you should be working any more. You have to give it up, now. The work is too slippery and dangerous for a woman in your condition. Your balance must be badly compromised as it is." Margaret insisted seeing the look on Angela's face, "you know its true, no one's footing is so secure this late in pregnancy, to be safely wading around in that disgusting filth."

"Yes," Jimbo agreed, not at all happy with the resurrection of Vlad, "you've done more than enough."

"That's all true," answered Angela, "but I so want

to contribute. It's been such a salve to my nerves, having something to do during the day and being able to sleep normally at night again."

So Angela stopped working because of her pregnancy, and with her Margaret, who, because of her age, was readily allowed to stay at home with her. Jimbo was switched to night patrols as the promised curfew came into effect. Part of his job was to guard groups of doctors, who were exempt from the general curfew, on their walk to and from the medical centre. Donald, because of his age, was kept on the lighter ward duty but moved to the night shift.

One evening, as they sat around the kitchen table, being at that time before Donald and Jimbo went on shift rather than after, Jimbo announced that there had been a breakout from one of the detention centres. Vampires spilling out everywhere, perhaps two hundred of them. Some had made it to the residential area, and not all had been recaptured so far. It was reckoned that they may well have been led into the breakout by some form of unusual intelligence. The worrying details were that firstly, they shouldn't have had any such intelligence and that secondly, they might be able to draw in the stragglers that roamed the area at night and create a larger, more cohesive force. Unfortunately, one of the catchers had failed to report back at the end of the previous shift and two doctors and a nurse were missing.

Angela was worried. She didn't like Jimbo out there at night under the new arrangements. It was too difficult a job and, anyway, she was close to full

term. She wanted him near her. Of course, he was under a promise, and so was Donald so they trotted off to work at dusk as usual. Angela went to lie down. Margaret cleared up and then got stuck into her knitting, thinking all the while of poor Maureen, who had taught it to her, lying on her kitchen floor with vampires crawling all over her... ripping.... sucking...

Around one o'clock in the morning, Margaret woke Angela in the dark.

“Come to our room and look out the window, but don't put on any lights.

Angela followed, and as she arrived at the other corner of the flat, where the window was open, she began to hear an uproar. There was another block quite close by on that side and howls and screams were coming from the ground floor where the entrance and shops were. Both women had heard enough while on the island to know that this was a full scale vampire attack. Windows were smashed and the screaming victims brutalised, systematically, as the consuming wave of terror moved slowly up the building, floor by floor. Small fires broke out, illuminating the aftermath of crimson-splattered bodies and smashed furniture and threw into stark silhouette the scrawny figures that clambered perilously up the outside walls. Others were on the stairs and each level was denuded of life and sanity before they moved on upwards.

“That's one of the nurses hostels,” whispered Margaret. “I've been chatting with people

downstairs when I go to the shop for food. It's called C4, it's identical to this block. It holds about a thousand nurses and support staff."

"Nobody's stopping them," cried Angela. "Where is the night guard? Why don't they come running?"

The crunching, snarling, whimpering wave moved steadily upwards - broken glass, broken furniture and broken bodies left in it's wake. It was impossible to number the attackers from the glimpses they had through the windows, but surely a hundred thought Angela as she watched in horror. Above the wave, the lights were springing up while below it, only the glow from an occasional fire showed through the broken and blackened, sightless windows. No help came. The hellish noises didn't stop until the top floor was as black as the rest below it.

It was a night of the full moon, and with very little thin cloud to obscure it, it shone forth regally upon and through the skeleton of what had been a fine building just an hour before. Right on top, up on the roof of the half-destroyed winding house for the lifts, a figure appeared, dressed in black that glinted silver above in the moonlight and shone redly below from some fire down in the lift shaft.

Angela froze. The figure was watching them. Looking down into their room where the moon must have picked out their shocked forms from the darkened background. She could almost see his pale eyes drilling through the hundred or so yards of space between them. He knew it was her, and she knew it was him.

“It's Vlad,” she whispered, “he'll come for us next.”

Margaret shivered.

That night's carnage was over, however, as a phalanx of leather bound catchers arrived, far too late, at the front of the building. As they filed in through the wrecked doors, blood-splashed vampires could be seen coming out of the windows and climbing down the outside, to jump to the grassy ground behind the building, scattering and disappearing into the night. Those that could not escape were immobilised and rounded up, being taken in linked groups to the holding pens. Angela and Margaret watch events unable to remove their eyes from the scene. They could clearly see that the number of vampires caught was not nearly as many as those that got away.

It was dawn before first Donald, who knew little but some whispered rumours of the night, and then Jimbo, who had been in the thick of the belated rescue attempt, arrived back at the flat. Jimbo was badly shaken, he spent a long time under the shower trying to compose himself before meeting the women for breakfast.

As they sat down Angela opened the only possible topic by saying, “we saw it all. The block is next to this one.”

“It was horrible,” said Jimbo, “not to be believed. Blood was everywhere. Every floor, every flat destroyed. Wrecked systematically as they sniffed out people who were hiding. We only found two dozen survivors in the whole block. Managed to

catch about two hundred vampires, though many of them were freshly bitten nurses who were on the change."

"How many got away?" Angela asked.

"About the same I suppose," Jimbo replied.

"About a thousand, more like it," Angela corrected.

"We saw them from here," Margaret added, "swarming out over the sides and back of the building and jumping down to safety as you went in the front and up the stairs."

Donald, who knew nothing of these things was about to burst, and Margaret took him into their bedroom to see the skeletal remains of what had once been block C4.

When they returned, Donald said, "that's decided it, I can't leave you girls here alone at night, again. I may not be able to stop a slaughter like that, but I'll die trying to defend this flat."

Jimbo looked gratefully at Donald, "at least you'll be here. I've already promised to help guard the residential areas tonight. They have given us whistles to call for help and we have to spread out between the blocks with a few at each entrance. At least I can make sure I'm posted at our entrance, but if there are any whistles blown, I will have to back them up.

That night the medical centre operated with a reduced staff. Services operating through to MegaTom were truncated. Beds stood idle with no one to tend them. Gallantly, those who were able to

work, carried on into extended shifts. It was the second night of the full moon and under the medical centre, in their cages, the vampires were sorely agitated - they wanted human blood.

Jimbo was given his wish and was placed, in full gear, at the main entrance of block D4 with four others. Spread throughout the doorways and paths of the residential area were almost a thousand people, many volunteers with sticks, nets and the all-important whistles, on guard, waiting for the expected invasion. Angela and Margaret ran from window to window watching and waiting for the inevitable. As one o'clock approached the tension mounted.

Meanwhile, a small group entered, unseen, the back of the sprawling medical centre, the part facing away from the residential area. The ground on that side was a level lower, opening out onto a path used by the support staff to clear waste from the centre by taking it to the disposer, which stood some way off. The large rubber doors were not lockable. Not far inside the doors on this level were the first of the vampire pens and the steady, inhuman cacophony they produced was a constant companion to anybody on this side of the vastly spreading building. The smell overpowered the senses. The night support staff drowsing inside, supposedly watching the pens, were few as no feeding or cleaning took place at this time of night.

The attacks were swift. No warnings could be heard against the increased backdrop of the howling and baying for the full moon. One of the group, dressed in oily black, removed a set of keys from an

early victim and began opening cages. A horde of vampires rushed out into the corridors, snarling and growling, sweeping up the stairs and out into the main corridors and wards of the hospital like a flash flood. Meanwhile, with great concentration to overcome his awkwardness, the figure draped in black steadily continued to open cages, one by one, until all were unlocked and standing empty. Glimpsed in the reduced red lighting, with wisps of steam rising from the blood coagulating on his chin, he dropped the keys to the floor after releasing the last lock and walked back out into the cool night air.

It was only a short time before the guards nearest to the medical centre heard the uproar inside and started blowing their whistles. As the protective rings of the blocks began to flow towards the medical centre, Jimbo held his ground, refusing to be pulled from his station. Soon all around him was motionless – holding its breath in the tense atmosphere as the medical centre drew all available attention towards itself. Then, off to one side, a black form detached itself from the shadow of block E4. Jimbo recognised him at once and took a warning stance of readiness with his sparking cattle prod raised. The figure dissolved back into the shadowy blackness.

By morning, around the breakfast table, Jimbo faced the other three who were agog for news. He had only just come in and showered off the acrid sweat that had accumulated during a tense night under the leather protective suit.

“I didn't move from here the whole night,” he began. “I got the story from those returning home

from the medical centre. It was uproar over there – doctors, nurses and patients being ripped apart. Support staff completely overrun. We even lost a few of ours in full leather. They were zapping anything that moved, while the volunteers who were not in leather were hurriedly dragging them down to the cages. It was 50/50, for every vampire put in the cage they had to put in a doctor or nurse or cleaner or one of ours. The cages all worked perfectly, somebody had gone in round the back and opened them up with a key."

"That's just not possible," threw in Margaret. "Who would do such a thing? Who who dream of releasing thousands of vampires?"

"Vlad," Angela answered, simply.

"Unfortunately, I think you're exactly right," said Jimbo, "I saw him lurking round the side of the block next door, after everyone had run off to the medical centre."

"I'm not being paranoid," Angela pleaded, "he's after us. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole medical centre fiasco wasn't just a diversion to try to open up the defences of this building to him."

Margaret and Donald gave each other looks.

"Anyway," Donald started, to change the subject, "perhaps I should have been there, in the ward during the night, helping, but I'm glad I was up here, as a second line of defence."

The other three could only silently nod in agreement.

INTERLUDE

Disaster, when it came, was sudden, swift and overwhelming. The two couples had mercifully run and hidden in the maintenance cupboard next to the lift. Donald had worked in there for three days, to create a false wall halfway into it, with a tight, but liveable nest, equipped for the four of them, behind it. Margaret and Angela had told him something they knew from their cage cleaning days, that one thing vampires hated was detergent. The fumes and the smell of it made them retch. So just outside the false, back wall he set a container of detergent, with the lid off, ready to be kicked over as they retreated inside. He had hoped the fumes would blanket their own scent from the noses of the vampires.

The very night he finished the retreat, they were cowering silently inside it, trying not to choke on the invading fumes of detergent and acrid smoke from the fires in the block. Outside was pandaemonium. Death or worse, however, passed them by. Avoiding detection through the ingenuity of Donald's planning, they were able to crawl back to their flat in the now devastated Block D4 during their third day away. It had been wrecked thoroughly, almost vindictively, “by Vlad,” Angela

thought to herself. In truth, it was unlivable, but where else was there?

Jimbo now stayed beside the heavily pregnant Angela, who, in mild shock, stayed confined to bed, while Margaret hopelessly "tidied" the shambles and made endless cups of tea. Donald, as was his nature, spent the days away, expanding his network of "friends" in the remnant of the Medical Centre. He would invariably return, as it was getting dark, with foodstuffs and sundries.

One day Donald returned with dinner and some surprising news. Meals and talks were now taken around Angela, propped up in the wreckage of their bed.

"I've been talking to Fred in Personnel," he began, excitedly. "He has found our Personal Profiles."

The other three did not rise to the bait.

"He tried to explain to me how such information is kept, but I just couldn't understand what he was saying. Anyway, however they do it, they have saved the records of everybody who has ever worked here."

Still no response.

"And in the records, apart from the four of us, is your father, James. He did come over the Wall, and worked here in the Planning and Development section about two hundred years ago. According to the records, he was very bright, likeable and a generally useful chap to have around."

"But not for his woman and child," thought

Angela, but she bit her lip.

Even so, with that Donald had achieved the desired effect. All four became animated and the conversation went on late into the night over this tit-bit of news. So he really hadn't become lost roaming around SwitchOn looking for old books, he had gone over the Wall and had accepted to be recruited into the Centre's work there. As had Jimbo after him.

”Like father, like son,” said Margaret eventually wrapping it up.

“But not for his woman and child,” thought Angela, happily, “the son brought them with him,” and she bit her lip, again, as she saw the hang-dog expression on Jimbo's face.

PART 4

The doctor was taking too long with Angela. Jimbo paced up and down the lounge in his overcoat while Margaret and Donald, similarly dressed, sat very upright on the remains of a settee, holding hands. Wind whistled through the empty window frames, making it difficult to look outwards against it at the vista of sooty, concrete and brick towers that used to be the domiciliary part of a thriving technological centre.

Finally, the doctor emerged, leaning on the smashed doorway of the bedroom where he had examined Angela.

"You had all better come and hear what I have to say."

The other three entered and waited with bated breath. The doctor began, looking intently from face to face.

"Angela is now ten months pregnant. There is no sign of the birth being anything like near. I have to tell you that no birth has taken place here for two months. Angela is not alone in her plight. There is, unfortunately, a growing band of undelivered babies keeping to their mother's wombs.

"It's tempting to think that after the vampires almost completely wiped out our little colony here, no baby is prepared to emerge into the wreckage. However, I can tell you that this is not so. There is a deeper, spiritual problem at work here.

"I have been in touch with other survivors, cleverer than me, who seriously believe that with all our people being infected and being locked into vampirism there are no free souls or spirits available to enter a new baby. That once infected, even after expiring as a vampire the soul of the departed is trapped in a kind of astral prison. Chained in a causal limbo that links back, being by being, to the original source of the disease."

"Vlad," groaned Angela, sitting up on the remnant of a bed.

"So rumour has it," agreed the doctor. "I don't suppose we shall ever know the truth of what has

happened in the past, but its effects are being felt ever more strongly in the present. I am afraid, the official logic suggests that currently, without the presence of a soul to occupy your baby at birth, you are unable to deliver it from your womb."

"I thought, after the triumph of science, all this religio-spiritual stuff was dropped. Especially after the creation of MegaTom," Jimbo mused. "Was there actually something to it then?"

"I'm not quite the appropriate person to answer that question," the doctor replied, "but this is not a religious or superstitious matter. The answer lies in the Mind element of the Space/Time/Mind continuum. We know the least about how life is affected by Mind's three particular dimensions."

"Never mind that kind of philosophical talk, James," interrupted Margaret. "What can be done about Angela? How long can she go on for, like this?"

"The truth is," said the doctor, preparing to leave, "I just don't know. All we can do is wait. I am not inclined to intervene surgically as, in our present state, it could be catastrophic for both mother and baby."

Jimbo accompanied the doctor to the head of the stairs.

"You'll have to watch your feet out here," Jimbo said, leaving the flat, as they approached the stairwell. Outside a wrecked maintenance cupboard a large container of detergent had been spilled right across the floor leaving it both smelly and sticky.

"That was Donald's idea," he said. "He found the

container in the remains of the medical centre, and brought it up here to deter any roaming vampires at night. They hate the smell of detergent."

"Good idea," acknowledged the doctor. "Perhaps, I'll try something like that, they're such a pestilence. But you had better watch they don't come up the outside walls. Mind you, at this height..."

After the doctor had gone, Angela began to cry. Jimbo sat next to her on the bed and tried to comfort her. Margaret and Donald withdrew "to make a cup of tea."

After a while Angela dried her eyes and said with conviction, "Vlad is the key. You heard what the doctor said. They now believe that all the souls or spirits waiting to be born have been locked into some kind of limbo. Just like we locked the vampires up in the cages under the medical centre, and now the souls are unable to enter our babies. That's why no babies can be born any more. This all began with Vlad. He was the first vampire. He was actually born with the disease. He is the root cause of all the infections in the world. All the others hang from him, whether they're alive or dead. It's like a giant pyramid with Vlad at the top, then everyone he has bitten, then everyone they have bitten and so on down to the latest victims."

"What's this talk about a spirit or a soul?" Jimbo responded, wanting to get the subject away from Vlad. "I though we dropped all that good versus evil and God talk with the coming of MegaTom. I thought that such pseudo-religious ideas were

forgotten after science freely supplied everyone with the basic necessities of life. Now we have a doctor, a man of science, telling us that those cleverer than him, that is – scientists, I suppose, are saying that all the human souls are locked up in limbo by some evil force. What kind of a backward looking world is this we are living in?"

"A practical one," Angela snapped back. "If those concepts are necessary to understand this world as it is, then we should be prepared to take them on – like those cleverer people have. That is the overall will of the Mind, and we shouldn't try to kick against it. One thing I am sure of, though, is that Vlad is a victim of this as much as anybody. He was born with a deficiency that is way beyond his understanding. He is only trying to survive, just like we all are."

At that point Margaret and Donald entered with the tea.

"The destruction here was so quick," said Margaret, hoping to cool down the heated conversation between Angela and Jimbo.

"Yes," agreed Donald, "how quickly they spread. In a week they had eradicated the entire medical complex and its residential area and moved on to the clothing centre and then to the food centre."

"True," added Jimbo glad of the change of subject, "in less than a month the whole complex serving MegaTom for this area was wiped out."

"There are so very few proper people left," Donald began, "but I see a few around. Like the couple in the food centre who still manage to

duplicate something to eat and pass it out to me for us to have. There's a maintenance man in the medical centre who says that only about ten beds are still operational and only two ports for the return journey."

"Really?" asked Jimbo. "Some equipment does still work?"

"He offered to send us back to the island, if we wanted to."

"Really?" asked Angela, this time brightening up, but then sank back down on the bed. "But it would be back into the vampire attack."

"Yes, but he offered to put us there a hundred years after we left it. All the vampires would have been dead by then."

"But, he still couldn't do that, both ports were destroyed," Margaret remembered.

"Not both medical ports, though, that's how Vlad got off the island, remember? This man said he could send us back as healthy returns to one of those."

"That would be nice. How I would like to be back in our lighthouse knitting a little woolly. That's the proper place to bring up a baby," mused Angela. "Wait, though. Think it through. It couldn't be the same. The travel ports are ruined. We probably couldn't get food, as it would have to come from the food centre here which has been wrecked..."

"Unless it had already been sent out to us," Jimbo pointed out, "before the time we arrived here. It's

thousands of years in this time's past don't forget."

Angela gave Jimbo a withering look and continued, "all the animals would be gone. Probably the vampires destroyed the buildings in their rage looking for food as they became more and more hungry before they started killing each other. And... there wouldn't be a boat left on the island, we took all three of them with us. We would be stuck there, living on wild berries at best. And... if we tried to return through the medical port we would just be diagnosed as healthy or at most given some supplements or face cream."

No one felt like arguing with Angela's summing up.

Donald finally changed the subject. "I found a man with some of the newer cattle prods. He said he could let us have some, as there is nobody left to give them to in the medical centre. He said that, in the night over at the clothing centre, people had been being rounded up and put into cages, like we caged them, and other roaming vampires are spreading out across the countryside looking for victims."

"That would be nice of him," said Jimbo absent-mindedly as they all slipped into their own thoughts.

That evening, with the wind howling through the thin, makeshift curtains over the window, supper was taken on their laps around Angela's bed. A torch provided the only light, powered by batteries that Donald was able to keep charged by one of his new "friends." As they ate in silence, flashes of

lightning lit up the distant sky.

“There's a storm coming,” pointed out Donald, “the rain will be blowing in soon.”

On cue, the pitter-patter of the first large drops began on the bare cement of the denuded windowsill.

“Come on weatherman,” said Margaret to Donald, as she took his plate from him, “on a night like this, bed is the only sensible place to be. Let's leave the youngsters in peace.”

Margaret and Donald, after taking Angela's and Jimbo's plates, withdrew.

The now soaked curtain, whipped by the wind, with a sizeable blob of blackened, wet detritus from the roof stuck to it fell inwards to the floor of the room with a squelching plop. Jimbo who was sat on the other side of the bed began to rise to sort it out, but the detritus rose up on its own away from the wet curtain on the floor.

“Hello Vlad,” said Angela, holding Jimbo's arm to restrain him.

In the torchlight, Vlad having risen to his full, though diminutive, height, appeared even more black and glistening than usual with the rain on him. His eyes were fixed on Angela.

“Vlad hungry.”

“Wouldn't you like to eat normal food, Vlad?” asked Angela.

“Vlad made wrong,” he said, shuffling, showing some irritation.

“Wouldn't you like to be made right?”

“Doctors no good.”

“No, not doctors...” Angela took a detached, angelic look. Vlad and Jimbo just stared. “My baby needs a soul to be born, and you, having suffered so much, need a new, healthy body. I think, I would very much like you to be my baby, if you'll have me as your mother?”

Vlad looked from one to the other, “Vlad?”

Angela squeezed Jimbo's hand, and his voice came from his depths. “Vlad, I have to speak to you as your father. My father, your grandfather, had once said, that if you wish to pick up something new, you must first put down whatever it is you are holding.”

Vlad appeared stunned, staring into space, and then turned back to Angela and whispered, “you want Vlad?...”

The heavens cracked as a bolt of lightning ripped through the air and hit the block. The simultaneous boom of the thunder was all-encompassing. The ground, so far below, literally shook under the impact. Into the silence of the vacuum within that aftermath a huge sigh, as if from a myriad souls, came rushing down from heaven to that point and spread out, rippling across the earth. Within the blinding flash the oily blackness that had been Vlad had crumpled back down to the sodden curtain on the floor, smoking, lifeless. Angela screamed... and then... a baby cried.

Margaret came hurrying into the room, as if she was ready and waiting, on call. Jimbo was shooed away “to boil water” and Donald was sent out into

the torrential rain to bring the midwife and the doctor.

From the lounge, punctuating his pacing back and forth in the confined space, Jimbo could hear Margaret alternately cooing to the baby and instructing Angela to keep up the pressure because of the bleeding.

Although it seemed an eternity, the doctor, and later the midwife with Donald following, soon came in dripping, and went straight to the bedroom. After another eternity the doctor came out.

“It's all alright,” he said, as he fell into a tattered one-armed chair, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. “She ripped a bit with the speed and size of the delivery. But I have stitched her up and given her some pills in case of infection. She's young and strong, she'll recover. The baby looks fine too, he's on the breast, now. Not much real milk at this point but it will soon start flowing.”

Before Jimbo could speak, somebody far below, out in the rain, was shouting, “doctor, doctor, come quick, she's gone into labour.”

“Looks like a busy night,” said the doctor, palming off Jimbo's attempts at thanks, “I'm off.”

Jimbo walked to the bedroom door and looked in at the sight of his Angela holding their baby to her breast.

“It's a boy,” said Angela, beaming through her exhaustion and pallor, “and his name is Vlad.”

It was three days before the doctor allowed Angela out of bed, to walk about the lounge while little Vlad slept. As she waddled up and down, still in some discomfort from the stitches, her mind was racing. “It feels so different, now. Can't you feel it? It's like that storm cleared the whole psychic atmosphere as well as the physical one.”

“I've heard that the vampires are receding,” Donald replied. “Nobody knows how or why, but there are just fewer and fewer of them. It does feel fresher, though, I must say.”

“But what happened that night?” Margaret asked. “You never told us.”

“No, I needed some time, and perhaps you did, too. Well... Vlad came in through the window. I think he must have swung down from the roof,” Angela answered, as Donald and Margaret gasped. “After what the doctor had said about the lack of souls for babies, I decided to deal with him myself, come what may. So, I offered to mother him if he was prepared to enter my baby. He looked tempted and even touched, but didn't know what to do about it. Then James, rather marvellously,” she looked at Jimbo who blushed, “said that his father had said that if you want to have something new, you have to drop whatever you have now, to be able to pick it up. Then, in a blinding flash, Vlad gave up his body on the spot, the heavens opened up with a crash, the earth shook and our baby, our own lovely Vlad, was born.”

Seeing the shocked looks on his in-law's faces, Jimbo added, “It's all true. I took Vlad's old body out and buried him, secretly. A half sized body covered in black leather. It was still smoking from the lightning strike. It was him, and it did happen just like that. Anyway, listen, if that view of events is too big a thing to swallow so suddenly, you may prefer to believe that the lightning strike killed him as he stood in the window and scared Angela into giving birth. My father was also fond of saying that whatever happens in the higher realms will appear down here on Earth with a simple, logical explanation, not to frighten people.”

Groping for a way to defuse the awkwardness he felt, Donald said, “who would have thought we would come all this way to a medical centre so that you could give birth in a filthy, wrecked flat without anybody in attendance?”

“It's true, Dad,” Angela answered, bringing him back to the point, “we did make a pact with Vlad. Things will change now, you'll see.”

“On that point, I have had some ideas,” Jimbo put in. “Do you feel up to a bit of travel, Angela? I'm afraid it's rather urgent, or I wouldn't suggest it yet.”

“Yes, if it's not too far to walk.”

“Good. Then there are some things that need to be done before the mind element of the continuum starts its tremors to smooth things out and establish order in the spark of the Now. I will need some help from Donald's friends in the medical centre, and then we should go.”

Jimbo took Donald aside and had a very long

whispered discussion with him and between them they created a list on a sheet of paper. Then Donald left.

“What's going on?” Angela asked.

“A plan,” said Jimbo, “I've glimpsed a plan to get our lives back before the natural sorting out of tensions ties us down here. It would take at least as long to explain it and convince you that it will work, as it will to do it. So just trust me. Let's get all our necessary stuff together, and a bit of food, we are going on a journey. We will meet Donald at the medical centre.”

Angela and Margaret began collecting what was needed for the baby first and then food and general necessities, while Jimbo gathered up the leather anti-bite suits and knives, nets and rope.

“But the vampires are gone from the centre,” Margaret pointed out.

“Yes,” Jimbo replied, “but we will not be using them there.”

So, carrying all their possessions, which were woefully few, having been raised in MegaTom, they quitted the flat that had been their home for some several months. Carefully, picking their way through the rubble on the stairs, with Jimbo leading, they descended the 23 flights to the ground. Angela had Vlad in a makeshift sling and having been recently fed, he slept the whole way. Finally, Angela and Margaret emerged from the block as if for the first time. They had been incarcerated there for an eternity, it seemed. The air was fresh and full of sunshine. Some other people were outside

shuffling around, looking pale and dazed, as if beginning a recuperation from a long-term illness.

The walk away from the block was a very different one from their first walk to it, six months before. However, they again stared around themselves in amazement. Instead of the shining white, pristine blocks of flats, they stumbled between blackened concrete skeletons, draped from empty windows in tell-tale linen rags or patches of dried redness. As Jimbo led them to the doors of the medical centre they were able to take in the utter destruction that had come upon that facility. Seeing some of it from the 23rd floor window had not prepared them for the degree of wreckage at ground level, but even as they looked teams of cleaners and salvagers were busy in the ruins. A medical team was collecting bodies to be taken to the disposer.

"Perhaps," Angela mused, "Vlad will be the only vampire to have ever been buried."

Inside the medical centre, more teams were hard at work clearing up, with specialist maintenance engineers working on various pieces of equipment. They soon came across Donald who was carrying a bundle of nets and four cattle prods.

"Ah, you've made it," he said. "These are the latest design, and they can kill a vampire on the highest setting."

"Ah! That's good," responded Jimbo. "How about your other friend?"

"Oh, that's fine. He said he'll do it anytime. They have another three units working, now."

"What are you two talking about?" Angela asked,

in exasperation. “If you don't explain, we won't follow you.”

“You'll have to,” said Jimbo and Donald together.

“There is no time to analyse things, now,” Jimbo added. “It's time for action. Come on!”

Donald led them through the maze of corridors, avoiding spots of major damage, until they arrived at a corridor filled with what looked like the travel side of MegaTom ports. There was a man there, on the floor, working on one of the units, two more were climbing over another with spanners and screwdrivers in hand.

Approaching, Donald said, “OK, Ray? This is the family.”

“Hello,” Ray responded, standing up, “have you got the exact coordinates, Donald?”

Donald handed Ray a piece of paper.

“Right. Who's first?” Ray asked.

“I had better go first,” Jimbo decided. “You bring up the rear, Donald.”

Jimbo stepped into the booth that Ray had indicated, holding two of the new prods and bags of clothes for Vlad, Angela and himself. The booth was worked from the outside, and after Ray had copied the settings onto his panel, he pressed the red button and Jimbo disappeared.

“You next, Angela,” Donald directed, and Angela, with baby Vlad and a bulging shoulder bag, entered the booth and disappeared. Margaret followed with her bag. Donald, thanking Ray, entered the booth with the other two prods, nets and bite-suits and

vanished.

Jimbo stepped out from the medical port and looked intently at the lighthouse tower and adjoining quarters on the hill behind the port as Angela appeared holding baby Vlad. She was looking around amazed as she emerged from the portal, but Jimbo motioned to her to keep quiet as Margaret was appearing.

“Our other selves are eating lunch in the kitchen,” he whispered as Donald appeared, “they mustn't see us. Other Donald is working down on the shore out of sight with the dingies and preparing our rope exit.

“Quickly,” he continued, “we have to get down to the castle to John the blacksmith, before we are seen.”

In no time they were down the slope to the castle keep cum smithy and calling quietly through the railings.

“Let us in, John,” Donald pleaded, “We have a lot to tell you.”

With the dogs chained up, and after the amazed but genuine congratulations from John and Maureen over little Vlad, considering Angela was only just showing the day before, Maureen took Angela with Vlad and Margaret into the kitchen on the north wing of the building for a cup of tea, while Donald and Jimbo followed John, Peter and Paul into the small office next to the smithy, which dominated the end of the south wing. The discussion in the office, which involved descriptions, questions and more detailed descriptions and more searching questions

lasted for more than two hours, before the plan of action was hammered out. Finally, all the men knew their places in what was to follow that night. The meeting was finally broken up by the women, who, in desperation, had appeared with tea and cakes.

After the tea, when the women had withdrawn, Peter and Paul were shown how to use the cattle prods, and how to get into the leather bite-suits, while John said he was happy to stay in his thick, leather apron by the forge, which would be kept alight all night, and have his three pairs of long tongs in the fire, ready.

Then the men entered the north wing and started sizing up the layout of rooms and windows on the ground floor. The women were unnerved with the talk, and Peter and Paul were sent to the portal to bring back enough food and drink for everybody for the evening and night. By now the women were certain something terrible was coming, so Donald finally had to lay out Jimbo's plan to them. It was a difficult moment when Maureen realised that her whole family was due to be ripped apart by the vampires that night. She asked Margaret and Angela, again and again, to recount what they had heard and seen. Finally, she accepted the point and Donald continued explaining the plan. At the end of his description no one spoke. Each was numbed by the risk and gravity of the situation.

Maureen broke the silence by asking Jimbo, “if you four, sorry five,” she smiled at sleeping Vlad, “were free from these horrors, what possessed you to think up a plan like this? We could all, you

included, still be ripped apart by the vampires, and the other versions of you would escape just as before. There is no guarantee of success. You have put your family back into mortal danger."

"Oh, he's like that," answered Margaret for him. "He once saved me from a whole gang of vampires," and she told Maureen the story of her rescue.

Jimbo, more than a bit embarrassed at the combination of criticism and praise answered the question by saying, "my only regret is that I couldn't find a way to save Billy the boatman within the plan."

"Well, I'll tell you something, now," John replied, "that Billy told me in confidence just a few days ago. Although, he had instinctively fought off the vampire in his boat, he said that he was getting very tired of his solitary existence and that without his wife he had had just about enough, and wouldn't have cared so much if the vampires had got to him."

"Well, in that case he will shortly have his wish," Donald said, earning a "look" from Margaret.

"This room needs to be made secure," John mused, "with you three women and the baby inside. The windows are small, we can solidly board them up with cut planking and some railing jammed inside to support it. Make sure the only entrance is the door and reinforce that as well. When the time comes, there must be no risk of vampires getting into here."

"What about the ceiling?" Angela asked. "We saw them going through the roof. If they rip up the

floor upstairs they will be able to drop onto us."

"No," answered John. "When we moved in the floor planking was a bit weak so we installed a thick wire mesh under the upper boards for support. They won't get through that. There's one under the floor down here as well, so they won't come up from under, either. Only the door will be a weak point, but we'll soon deal with that. Come on lads, there's work to do."

While John, Peter and Paul began measuring around the door and windows and marching off to the smithy with their results, Maureen, Margaret and Donald went off to the kitchen to wash up and prepare the supper.

Once they were alone, Angela asked Jimbo, "how could you do it, James? Why didn't you explain it to me first, instead of keeping me in the dark?"

"Would it have helped?" Jimbo asked back. "You had just recently given birth for the first time and it wasn't an easy experience, hardly typical. Could you have accepted such a thing, then? How was I going to explain that I had imagined a time loop in the making that we could possibly use to get our lives back? As you had said, it will take years to get the medical centre fully functioning again. That was no place to be with a young child. Coming back here, however, does involve a risk, if I have imagined it wrongly. But if all goes well we would have save John, Maureen, Peter and Paul and the animals and get our lighthouse back for little Vlad to grow up in."

Angela put her head on Jimbo's shoulder,

remembering the sounds of the savagery of the coming attack, desperately hoping that he had considered all the nuances correctly.

“If you have missed one detail, you will have brought us all back here to our deaths. After miraculously surviving the attack on this island once and then again on the medical centre, both thanks to my father's foresight and planning, and then me giving birth to Vlad in such a miraculous way, we could end up back here at the start, all slaughtered with John, Maureen and the boys. You may have condemned me to see our precious baby Vlad's new body ripped apart in front of my eyes by his old, discarded self.”

Jimbo put his head down. “I know,” was the only answer he could make.

By sundown, the women and baby were sealed in the eastern lounge and the men were free to roam the rest of the building. Jimbo called them all together out in the courtyard. Peter and Paul were dressed in the leather bite-proof suits, John had his thick leather apron, but Donald and Jimbo were just in double layers of their normal clothes.

“We two have seen some action against them,” Jimbo explained, “we know their ways, and we have the latest cattle prods. Peter and Paul, you also have them. The electric shock from one touch with the tip will incapacitate them for some time. Don't forget to use the nets. If you are overwhelmed, call for assistance. The four of us will all be on the first floor at different points and your dad will be down here. Don't be afraid to kill them with a longer or

stronger blast if you need to. Horrible though it seems, although they used to be people once, and still look quite like us, these beings have had their souls locked away from them, there is no meaningful existence for them as vampires and if we send them through the medical ports they just end up locked up in huge, disgusting cages ready and waiting for a chance to cause more trouble. The kindest thing we can do is to release them from the curse, bodily at least.

"I wouldn't have believed that I would ever say this, before our time in the medical centre, but they are just like chickens without heads, running around waiting to drop. There is no hope and no help for them, they really are not the people that used to be in these bodies. It sounds cruel, I know. It's only a disease, they are just sick people. We had always put them carefully in the medical ports before, but now, I have to say that killing them is not wrong. You will not be killing anybody – just an empty body.

"However, there is one, dressed in oily black leather. He has a wide-brimmed hat that droops down to his shoulders, a cape on his coat that angles down to his chest and a bottom hem on his coat that stands out from his knees. All in shining, black leather. He looks like a black fir tree. He is small and slight of frame, with a favourite trick of folding himself up on the ground to look like a discarded sack. This is Vlad, the originator of the disease. He must not be killed, just driven northward. If he should enter the house, please don't forget, drive him back out. It's absolutely imperative to the plan,

and to our family, that Vlad should not be killed."

Jimbo drew John aside. "You'll need a fire out here in the courtyard by dawn, with plenty of smoke, after the vampires have been dealt with, to look like the smithy is burning down."

"That's easy," replied John, "I have a brazier we can rig up with plenty of oily rags for the smoke."

"Also, your dogs must stop barking and fall silent during the attack."

"Then let's chain them in their kennel, and then I'll slam the door on them, that will keep them quiet."

"Good. It's a shame we'll have to lose our four outer hounds, but I can't see how to save them."

Finally, the last light of the sun sank away into the mists in the west and the night was upon them. The men took up their positions to wait for the attack. Jimbo, Donald, Peter and Paul spread around the first floor while John stayed at his smithy. The two dogs were not loose within the railings as was usual, but tied in their kennel. All were ready, waiting. Even so, it was hours before the sounds of uproar could be heard approaching on the sea, then down at the jetty in the bay.

The grunting, snarling and slobbering sounds combined into one callous cacophony rolled up the path from the beach towards the castle. The four on the first floor could clearly hear the growing noise coming down to them through the roof, definitely revealing it to be the weak spot in the buildings defences, John, being outside in the caged courtyard, could follow the progress in detail by ear,

as could his baying dogs.

Then the wave struck. Twenty scrawny bodies were clambering up the walls and railings, John took up his first pair of red hot tongs, the restrained dogs started snapping impotently at dangling legs on the bars, as John kicked shut the kennel door, and upstairs four cattle prods were raised in readiness towards the ceiling.

Roof tiles were ripped off and flung aside, windows smashed and soulless throats switched from snapping and snarling to shrieking and squealing as their soulless owners encountered armed resistance. In no time ten were dead or incapacitated upstairs, the rest withdrawing in panic.

"We have to leave you to follow them to the lighthouse," Jimbo told Peter and Paul. "Put the bodies out through the windows into the yard, check carefully round the house and look up on the roof."

As Jimbo and Donald waited for John to open the gate, Jimbo whispered to John, "if any still live, kill them. We will bury them at sea when this is all over. They are the remains of decent people."

John answered, "Will do. Vlad was outside the gates watching, I saw him. I think he was directing the attack. He led the rest towards the lighthouse."

At a run, Jimbo and Donald tracked the reduced mob to the lighthouse. Donald stayed there to clear those noisily attacking it, while Jimbo knew that he had to run on along the top of the cliff behind those following Vlad. At the descending path, Vlad passed it by, continuing north along the cliff, while

five of the vampires hearing a noise down the cliff had turned that way as Jimbo was approaching. He managed to jab three of them with his cattle prod and they all fled screaming and snarling down the path towards the sea.

Vlad, lacking stamina, was stood on the clifftop, panting, watching Jimbo.

“It's all over,” Jimbo said quietly. “Your followers are destroyed, there's no boat left on the island and nowhere left to hide.”

Vlad looked out into the moonlit sea, as if he could hear voices on the wind. He, instinctively, began to back away from Jimbo, moving north-east, towards the northern portal. Jimbo kept low, not wishing to be seen in silhouette from the boats that he knew by now were out there on the dark water. He dogged Vlad's steps, pushing him north, towards the portal and the animals. At the broken cage of the portal, Vlad stopped.

“You can't use that,” Jimbo mocked, waving his cattle prod in a low arc across the grass in front of Vlad, “it was smashed yesterday.”

But Vlad had craftily slipped into the opening of the cage and was sliding round the side to the medical portal. “Vlad go,” he said, and disappeared.

Jimbo had two more jobs to do, before he had completed the creation of the time-loop. Turning the setting on the cattle prod down below stun he attacked some of the nearby sheep and goats with it, causing them to bleat and squeal and scream horribly. “Sorry,” he said at last to them, “I had to

do it," as he hurried back towards the lighthouse keeping well away from the cliff edge.

Donald was just emerging from a broken window as Jimbo arrived.

"All finished," he reported. "Six dead. Put out through the front window, here."

"Vlad's gone," Jimbo retorted. "He felt very clever putting himself into the medical port. But now I need a tarpaulin."

"There's one stowed in the base of the lighthouse," Donald answered.

Jimbo took the tarpaulin up to the top of the lighthouse, and as he clambered out from one of the smashed inland facing windows, seeing across the island that John had lit the brazier and added the oily rags to create a column of billowing smoke, he stood uneasily atop the domed roof. With the tarpaulin carefully lifted above his shoulders, staring out to sea at the three pale smudges that the coming light of day revealed floating there, he hoped he looked enough like a cloaked Vlad in silhouette from that distance.

Finally he climbed back down to Donald. "There was no possibility of getting Vlad to do that," Jimbo puffed, glad to be back on solid ground again. "Let's get..."

"...back to the others." Donald finished for him, and started hurrying down the slope, past the smashed, southerly port and on to the castle, as Jimbo panted along behind.

John, Peter and Paul met them at the gate in the

railings.

“Twenty two,” said John. “All dead.”

“Let's check on the women,” Donald and John said together.

“Yes,” said Jimbo, “but I've left three, I think, of them, down at the foot of the cliff eating one of the others. We can't go yet because our other selves will still be out there in the boats, and none of us can risk being seen.

“They won't dare come here after the reception they had before,” John pointed out. “Anyway, the sun's coming up, it's daytime. Now they've eaten, they'll be hiding down there between the rocks or some bit of a sea cave from the coming sunlight. We can clear them up at any time, while it's still light.”

They called out to the women in the lounge before taking apart the barricade that had kept them safe, so the women had undone their side of things as well. Greetings were tearful and lengthy as the two family groups came to the realization that it was all over and that they were all safe and sound.

“Well,” said Maureen, finally, wiping the tears from her eyes, “this definitely calls for a cup of tea.”

“Let's go,” said Margaret to Angela, as baby Vlad began the first searching snuffles that marked the approach of a feed and a change.

EPILOGUE

After their rescue from the vampires, a matter which the blacksmith family whole-heartedly believed in, John, Peter and Paul took over control of events from Donald and Jimbo, who were suffering from physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. Four vampires were found in the rocks below the path that day and eliminated. A total of thirty three shrunken bodies were then consigned to the deep at the northern end of the island.

A simple raft was constructed, weather being kind, which John used to get to the mainland, where amid the vacated land and broken portals, he found one port that worked and was able to re-establish contact with his huge array of known associates.

Within a week, John had acquired a launch, had the two portals on the island repaired by an electronics specialist, and had both the castle and the lighthouse re-glazed and repaired. He even found time to repair the two portal grilles and sundry railings on both homes, himself, cutting new keys for everybody.

“Not,” he pointed out, “that they will be needed for vampires any more. Just as a reminder of what we have all lived through during these times.”

As Donald, Margaret, Jimbo, Angela and baby Vlad went to re-occupy the repaired lighthouse, John “borrowed” Donald and they went off in the launch, not returning until evening when they were preceded up the path by the crazy barking and yapping of two, hungry, very-pleased-to-be-home dogs, leaving two launches anchored out in the bay and two dinghies, drying, upturned on the beach by the jetty. John had taken Donald to the other island to the north where the vampires had attacked the four of them and driven them into the portal, and where both Billy the boatman's launch and the dogs were still patiently waiting at anchor.

No vampire ever reappeared in MegaTom. They had been there, they were not erased completely from existence, but their wave had swelled, peaked and then died out, as may happen to any natural phenomenon. Throughout MegaTom, the movement of the plaques of the Space/Time/Mind continuum had isolated the vampires activities in a sideline of history, which was no longer accessible. The mainland, shaken by tremors from the coalescing plaques was soon repopulated by people and animals, as air rushes in to fill a vacuum, while portals and houses were repaired by those whose pleasure it was to undertake such things. Far in the future, over the Wall, the Medical and associate Centres were clearly restored as no further anomalies were reported in the operation of the portals.

The Mind element, being among other things the holographic unity of all living minds, left the island and its plaques untouched, thanks to Jimbo and his

attention to detail.

While Peter and Paul both settled with women on the mainland, John and Maureen had a surprise late pregnancy, another boy, whom they called William, after their late friend, Billy the boatman.

Donald and Margaret, as doting grandparents, finished their years, contentedly, on the island.

James, no longer ever Jimbo, lived happily and thankfully in the lighthouse with Angela and Vlad, who grew steadily into a normal, healthy young boy and on into a normal, healthy young man. Of course, normal for MegaTom, that is.

LIFE SIX

YOU

PART 1

Ha! So you've washed-up on the beach. And you are still alive? Yes? Just.

Can you remember how you come to be here? Or why you are flopped down here in such a stupid, half-drowned state? It's a long story, isn't it? In fact, it's the story of your whole life – so far.

Of course, you don't remember being in your pod – who does remember that? Babyhood is likewise an absent memory. Your early childhood, having been born half way up the mountain as one of the upper Vine-keepers, was nothing spectacular. You learned through play, as all your people have done, and had begun, at the proper age, some minor duties of tending the vine and its pods that were given into your charge.

The facts of life, pertinent to you, were clear enough though, even from this early age. As was, equivalently, the geography of your surroundings. The particular piece of land you were born on, tapering up towards the mountain top as it does, majestic in its height, is all there is to know, except for the sea. This sloping land rises to its peak from the smooth surface of blue water which reaches unbroken to the horizon. Overhead, rises the clear blue roof of the sky. Climbing out from the water's edge at a few places along what is visible of the backward curving beach, is the vine. In great, green, twisting coils of stem and tendril and leaf it rises from its thick, tough roots anchored out in the sea. As it climbs up the initially gentle slopes of the mountain its greenery becomes gradually more refined, more delicate and looking up the steeper slope towards the summit, its greenness can be seen to fade into the yellowness of the sand, which does apparently reach all the way to the topmost point. From way up there spring rivulets of beautifully fresh, clear water that bubble and gurgle all the way down through the sand to the sea, gently washing and irrigating all that is found in their path.

From this mighty vine, everything else comes. People are born from carefully selected pods. They are fed from carefully selected pods. They are lightly dressed in materials created from carefully selected pods. They live in horizontal, social strata created and maintained by carefully selecting pods. The tending of the vine and selection and nurturing of pods is, understandably, the highest and only real craft of your people. It has been handed down as sacred, from generation to generation, by word of mouth and example, although nobody knows how or when it originated.

The motion within your world, as learned by rote from childhood, is simplicity itself. Below is the sea and above the sky. The sky has a hole. And through this hole, if it is above the horizon, the great outer fire can be seen, blazing. It blazes bright and yellow when the hole-in-the-sky stands above the mountain and gradually fades through orange and red to a dim purple when it sits on the horizon. What happens when the hole goes below the horizon is a mystery. But, of course, mysteries are not for the keepers of the vine to resolve. So, anyway, this hole-in-the-sky moves and the outer fire shines in, or doesn't – which is when the sky and the land turn dark and all the people sleep. Sometimes, the hole-in-the-sky shines for longer periods and the vine (and everybody else) does well, while during other times the dark wins and the vine doesn't do quite so well. Only those contemplative beings who live far up the mountainside could, perhaps, understand the why of such things.

The people are divided naturally into levels.

There is no social mobility or interaction between levels. How could there be? These levels lay along the side of the mountain in bands, from the beach where the Athletes compete to the highest levels of the mountain where the rumoured Mystics are supposed to sit and sense and meditate. Each band is vertically striped by the presence or absence of the vine as it snakes upward from its specific points of anchorage in the sea. This causes a separation into groups of those living at the same height as the people always cluster around their all-important stems and branches of the all-important vine. Of course, what may exist further along and around the mountain is another one of those mysteries that no Vine-keeper ever wonders about. The hole-in-the-sky may also shine in that direction, but what it illuminates is unknown, and of no concern to a Vine-keeper.

So this is the world into which you were born, small packets of people, each clinging to their own specific, central point on the vine, at their own proper level on the side of the mountain, without any real contact, beyond the members of their own group. Not that there is much communication within the groups, just the by rote repetition of the proper techniques for keeping the vine and nurturing its young. What else would a Vine-keeper need? Did I remember to mention the endless repetitions for tending the vine?

But you were a rebel. Do you remember that? It wasn't enough for you to sit on the sand and repeat, even with your intelligence, the duties required of you to keep your particular part of the vine and all

its offspring in proper condition. Or to perpetuate the sacred customs of your group as did all those around you. Or to hand on to those to come, in the future, a functioning society. No, not you. Once you had learned the overly intricate systems involved in bringing a pod into full maturity, and for the birth from it of a new member of the group, or the cropping of it at just the right time to produce the necessary food for adult or baby or occasional material for clothing, you got bored. You began to look about you, to shift yourself around in ways beyond your station. Rightly so, it began to unnerve those who were near to you – those common people. Of course, they didn't interfere with you, because that would have been beyond their station, but they did begin to distance themselves from you, instinctively. To them, you were beginning to resemble a trouble maker.

But you had a thirst for knowledge. Not for any useful reason, however, but just because you wanted to know more. You needed to see the land beyond the mountain, just because it must, necessarily, be there. You used to dream of seeing the life beyond, from an early age. Later you used it as a fantasy escape from the humdrum life stretching away before you. So the fantasy drew you onwards. You began to look away from your station. You walked to the next trunk of the vine, on the same level, which was a bit hidden, around the curve of the mountainside. There you found similar people doing similar things with similar concentration, but in slightly different ways. You found, however, that although their routines for tending the vine were

slightly different from your group's ways, their mistrust of your unwelcome prying was identical. Later you tried the other direction on the mountain with similar results. You even skipped some areas and went further afield to more remote vine trunks and always returned dissatisfied, deflated and none the wiser. You didn't dare, at that age, attempt to completely round the mountain to go the other side and leave it altogether.

Anyway, no good came of this wandering. If anything, the watching of the various interpretations of care had interpenetrated and interfered with your own training and affected your ability to care properly, in that precise way, at your own station. Consequently, your duties were reduced, because you couldn't quite be trusted to carry them out rigorously any more. Having been given this poor appraisal of your abilities by the elders, naturally, you were never allowed the honour of tending to the pods on the higher level of the Clerks, as you should have been, had your skills been fully acceptable.

Were you deflated by this stain on your character? Not at all. Not you. With your newly "earned" free-time you tried a different tack. You followed your own vine trunk down, below your group's area, towards the sea, an absolutely unimaginable happening. To begin with you regarded the people much like yourself, with routines much like your own, but, of course, they were suspicious of you. Let us state clearly at this point, that anybody else you met on the mountainside was suspicious of you, because no

one ever leaves their preset station. The lower you went the slower and squatter the people became. Their food was more gross, not so appetising to you, their patterns of care were cruder, their clothes rougher. There was nothing to interest you down there, in that sloppy parody of your own place, so you had to return. But then you could not keep still and tried moving up the mountain instead.

Any Vine-keepers who were sufficiently honoured to climb up to tend to the Clerks' vine (unlike you) tended to be thinner, because they didn't eat during the day while up there looking after the Clerk's pods, and had to be more exacting, their routines even more precise, more pedantic. You moved on up right into the level of the Clerks as if you had authority to do so. Here you stopped, in fascination, as you realised what exactly the Clerks were doing. They counted anything and everything they could see. Vine leaves, pods, people, fibres in clothing, grains of sand. They even counted in the abstract with small, hard, undeveloped pods thrown down on the sand to represent the items of the problem they were working on. They made sets of them. Then added to them, duplicated them, combined them, divided them. They drew shapes in the sand, dotting them about with the little, black pods to aid their calculations. Oh, you learned a lot from them, how to count, how to reason, how to plan. Each of them had a slightly different twist on these mental skills, but they were very thin, their food pods were quite scarce and concentrated, needing quite some quantity of water to wash them down, and you were

hungry being up so high. Yet you moved on up through their layer, observing. Then, at the top of the Clerks' band, you came to the level of the Judges and from there you were sent summarily back down to your own level with a good earful of earthy sense. But then, at least, you could eat again. You settled for some time after that, tending to your own part of the vine, absent-mindedly, dwelling in thought on all that you had seen. Remember?

At some point during this return, you discovered your super-pod. It was clear from the elder Vine-keepers that this thing should have been picked immediately, as it was already too wrong to grow into a Vine-keeper, too big and lumpy to serve as food and felt too rough and knotted in the fibres to serve usefully as fabric. Hidden as it was, in a fold under the trunk of the vine, the universal opinion was that it should be plucked and squished and buried in the sand to be dissolved and washed down by the running water into the sea where any goodness that could come from its ill-conception could be reabsorbed by the vine roots for the benefit of the whole. Unfortunately, it was in your small section of vine and perversely you decided that you would tend properly to this one. Now you were no longer bored, you washed it and stroked it and laid a bed of leaves for it to rest upon, and it responded and grew. How it grew. Larger and larger it became. The skin of the pod stretching and thinning and whitening. Much to the disgust of those around you. People now actively avoided you and the pod. The form inside the pod was wriggling and twitching and growing beyond any sensible

proportion. You couldn't wait to see what marvel you were about to bring out into the world. The other keepers even went so far as to bring down a Clerk from the level above to see it, but he had no real authority and you could not be talked out of caring for it.

Are you remembering all this? Is your head clearing from the foamy, salty inundation of your recent ordeal?

Then one day when it had grown to be three times larger than any pod ever seen before, while you were stroking it and washing it, it burst. What fell out? The finest, the most wonderful being anyone had ever seen? No! A giant Hand. Just a Hand. It lay palm down flexing its fingers as it dried. Behind the wrist, where an arm should have been attached with a whole body joined to it, the skin rounded off into a smooth stump. Who didn't stop and stare at that monstrosity and run away to whisper about it. Incidentally, it happened to be a left hand. So, with your aimless and illicit curiosity still on top, you fed it, because as you discovered, it took food in through a mouth-like slit in the centre of its palm. The trouble was that it was insatiable and very soon no amount of food was enough. So you took it slightly down the mountain to an empty part of vine you knew existed and gorged it on the thicker, cruder pods there that were growing untended. Incidentally, this wasn't out of kindness, because you were bothered by the quantities of food being taken from your compatriots, but rather that you wished to head off a visit from up the mountain by a Judge, who wielded the power to have the

Hand terminated if he so deemed.

There you fed the Hand, foraging about in more and more distant areas to add to the ration you could find for it locally. Very quickly it grew to three times your size. You even returned once to find it scratching and tearing at the bark of the vine with its fingernails and drinking the life-giving sap directly from within by laying across the injury and sucking on it, noisily, through that ugly slash in its palm. As a Vine-keeper, even a bad one, you regarded the vine as sacred, and were appalled by the sight, but, of course, had no power to make it stop. It would order you about with a wave of its index finger, a threatening wave. That was when you learned about fear. You had never felt real fear before that. That was when you first guessed what the next thing to fill its mouth would be, if you were too slow or negligent, and its food was found to be in short supply.

Now the time has arrived to take your mind back to another subject which has been skipped so far. In this innocent little world of sea, sand, vine and its peoples all living in peace and harmony (you excluded,) there is a nastiness, an abomination. An outrage to nature so great that your Hand becomes a minor offence in comparison. This anomaly, such an affront to all natural, organised life on the island, is a Phage. Mythology had it that the first phage must have dropped out of the blue from the great fire through the hole-in-the-sky and landed on one of the people or on a part of the vine, because when this happens that person or that piece of vine dies, horribly. While dead, before the sand can break

down the tissues and absorb the goodness of the deceased body and allow the trickling waters to wash it back to the sea, the area around the injury begins to swell. And as it swells the skin becomes thinner and stretches taut and begins to bulge and quiver. This is when it is at its most dangerous, for with the slightest loud sound or movement of air or even vibration of the ground the body erupts and twenty or thirty new phages are flung into the air, ready to infect anyone else who happens to be in range of the burst.

An individual phage is a long needle with a sac on the blunt end. If the needle sticks in someone the sac empties its poison through the needle into them. It is always lethal. If one manages to get through the tough bark of the vine then that part of the vine, and everything above it, is in trouble but luckily such an occurrence is rare. Unsuspecting people are by far the majority of victims. So when faced with a swollen, bloated body there is only one thing to do, run – and warn anybody else who may be around.

So now, before we can go back to the glorious account of your Hand, you must remember your final trip downwards, to the beach. After passing down through the level of the squat Vine-keepers, one emerges out onto the beach. Here a very different type of person grows, tall and muscular, lean and tanned. They are the Athletes. Just as your upper Vine-keepers spread upwards to tend the vines of the Clerks while they are busy with their own important business, the lower, squat Vine-keepers spread downwards to tend the vines for the

Athletes whose sole occupation is to busy themselves in competition on the beach. It was always strange to you, a true follower of no system, that although they tend to the vine and food pods of the Athletes, these misshapen creatures never partake of the food of their beautifully formed cousins. But then, of course, they wouldn't, they are not like you.

Through the work of the squat Vine-keepers, Athletes are free to spend their whole day racing each other up and down the beach, jumping in the sand and leaping over vine trunks. They even have long, straight sticks made for them by the squat Vine-keepers from bits of pruned vine stem that they use to propel themselves high into the air or throw along the beach in contests. You enjoyed your time with the Athletes, joining in their games, even though you couldn't really keep up. That was one of the happiest time for you, but still it had an emptiness. Once you had learned all the various combinations of running, jumping and throwing, you began to itch again. You began to sit on the beach with your back to them, staring out to sea.

That's when you first heard the Others. Such a group you had not even been aware existed. They were floating a little way off from the shore, hidden between and behind the thickest trunks of vine where it rose from the shallows. This was your first meeting with the Aquatics, a people so bloated that they are unable to support their great bulks out of the water. They were murmuring enticingly, calling to you, trying to get you to enter into the water with them. So, surprisingly, you did. Considering you

were such a rebel, such a rule-breaker, you had no real personal defences then. Straight into the water you walked, holding tightly on to the mighty vine roots, carefully wading out to them.

However, when the Aquatics tried to pull you into their wobbly raft of wallowing, rubbing, caressing, obese bodies, which are constantly being fed on the fattiest pods of the whole vine, those that grow around the edge of the sea just in or out of the water, you couldn't do it. Do you remember? You were completely repulsed. You climbed out of the water and sat on a vine trunk watching them. You were sickened by their bloated, white shapes that had an inbuilt buoyancy which kept them floating on the surface without any apparent effort. You were held there for some little time, as if mesmerised, watching, until you were finally able to back off, climbing carefully along the vine, back to the safety of the beach, away from their cooing mockery and flabby, beckoning hands. That was your first escapade in the sea. Do you remember that one?

So, you returned to the Athletes, and, while you were shaking off the water and shaking off the imposition of your previous encounter, they managed to relate to you a story of one of their own kind who had, long ago, set off at a lope along the beach to the left and, after some indeterminable time, reappeared from the right. He claimed he had run on the beach the entire way. You were amazed. It was beyond your understanding. You tried to imagine such an event in your head, but it was too much for you. He must have turned up the

mountainside and doubled back, while out of sight, at a higher level. How else could it happen? You just couldn't accept their story at face value. Now, obviously, they had only made this matter known to you, because, in you, they sensed the same wanderlust that had driven him. An average person, Athlete or otherwise, never travels far from his pod-place and rarely encounters people of other groups. Yet, in this way, and perhaps through their hope of getting rid of you, you were given a new purpose in life, an aim.

You took it on, although you didn't believe in it. Not that you intended to run all the way, you were no Athlete. Do you remember, now? Do the memories awaken in your being? How excitedly you set off from the group? Following the line of the beach to the left as it very gently curved away behind the lower edge of the mountain? The bare sand at the water's edge undulating gently, but always pulling back a little more to the left ahead of you, until you reached the next pile of vine trunks rising from the sea? Clambering over them, while ignoring any groups of Athletes and Aquatics that might slow you down or even cause you to forget the quest completely?

Your first sight of a phage-infected body came then. Do you remember? The bloated form of a squat Vine-keeper lying out on the open sand. Middle stretched horribly, white and quivering. You hid behind a vine trunk and watched. It did not take very long before the drying power of the hole-in-the-sky caused it to pop, spraying phages all around on the sand. Luckily, he was running down into an

open area before he collapsed and died so all the phages were wasted. They lay around him on the sand. You were able to examine one – its long, thin needle, hollow, sharpened at one end, with the bag of filth at the other, waiting to be squeezed into an unsuspecting body. As is the custom, you carefully buried each phage in the sand, to be re-absorbed. The remains of the body, now no longer a danger, could be left to be absorbed by the sand at its own rate.

So, on you went, crossing more sand, climbing over more vines and resting as the whim or thirst took you. As you travelled around the curving beach, you began to wonder when you would catch sight of the land behind the mountain. How would it be? An unknown world existed there. Could this be your chance to escape completely from your despised life as a Vine-keeper? You became excited, sensing the nearness of this new and different world. On you pushed yourself, overriding your body's demands for rest, driven by this vision of the possibility of a new life elsewhere.

Until at some point, when we have no way of knowing, a distant commotion on the sand far in front of you grew into a welcoming committee of excited Athletes as they saw you actually returning from the other direction to the one you had started from. You had successfully completed the mission of their fabled ancestor, albeit ridiculously slowly but at least you were back. Just be grateful to them, because without their watchfulness, you could have been trotting, walking and clambering round the shoreline forever, not realising you were over-

stepping the same ground again and again. Each stretch of sand, each pile of vine trunks or each group of Athletes looked much the same to you. Anyway, beyond thinking, you collapsed on the sand and slept. Remember? So, we see that this is not the first time you have collapsed exhausted on the beach, is it?

When you finally awoke, you were alone. The Athletes had returned to their usual contests, but during your long sleep, the journey had been processed and conclusions were crowding in upon you to be acknowledged. First, came the certainty that there is no other land beyond the mountain. This is all there is. This world is an island and the mountain stands at its centre. You had been completely around it. Next, while you were moving, you had been able to follow the positions of the hole-in-the-sky mentally and remember how it looked from your various points on the trip. The revelation was that it didn't move randomly around the sky. It followed a circle, from horizon to its zenith above the mountain to the opposite horizon and then under the sea and back round to the first point on the horizon again. In fact, if your mind could have contained the concept, the sky was just a hollow ball, half filled with sea, furnished with a hole, which had always been appropriately known as the hole-in-the-sky. You were dumbfounded, dealing with concepts beyond your station, but had the backing of those gleanings gathered from the Clerks' systems to thank for such an emerging understanding.

After this adventure, which the Athletes quickly

forgot, as you were not one of their own, they remained engrossed in their important business of running, jumping and throwing and you crept back up the mountain to your own place in the vine, seemingly more inclined to settle down. You tended what should be tended, you washed what should be washed and cropped what needed cropping. All were happy around you to see that you had returned to the fold, until the fateful day you uncovered that super-pod, which brings us back to where we were. You had thought you were tending to the creation of a super-Athlete, but all you had was a very hungry and belligerent, giant hand.

To feed the Hand, you were forced to forage further and further afield each day, as the local resources became depleted. While searching near the level of the beach, hidden within the folds and criss-crossing of the trunks of the vine, you discovered a newly infected body of a squat Vine-keeper, and with that windfall a plan appeared in your head. From nowhere, it just appeared. A plan of unimaginable, for a Vine-keeper, complexity to escape the Hand, which was daily becoming more and more menacing. It would raise its index finger and waggle it at you in an aggressively suggestive fashion, surely meaning that if you didn't feed it enough you would yourself be its next meal. Do you remember that? Ha! That was funny. You just stood there and shivered. You do remember that, don't you?

So, out you went as usual, only this time returned empty handed. The Hand was incensed. It rose up on its wrist, displaying the yawning mouth in its

palm and lunged towards you. Yes? You couldn't possibly forget that. Didn't you run? You turned back the way you had come and shot off downhill at top speed trying to emulate one of the Athletes. The Hand followed, climbing with ease over the vine trunks, gaining ground on you all the time. At last you came to the place for which you were heading. Reaching for the previously concealed stick of the Athletes, without slacking pace, you vaulted high over the next conjumblement of vine stems as the Hand made a grab for you. Falling safely onto the sand the other side, you rolled over and looked back to see the Hand banging down on top of the vines, triggering the explosion of the now ripe, swollen body of the squat Vine-keeper, which launched two dozen phages straight up into the palm of your pursuer. The Hand managed a few more awkward movements, stiffly, downwards towards the sea, before turning over onto its back, impotently twitching its fingers. It was soon motionless. And that was the sorry end of your great creation. Bye-bye, Super-pod. But that wasn't the complete end of its story, was it?

You dutifully sat by the Hand as it swelled, ready to warn anybody else to keep away. Not that many came, but anyway, you guarded the Athletes and Vine-keepers from the largest phage attack they were ever likely to have. Finally, the bulge and stretch on the palm, centring around the distorted mouth and up the insides of the fingers could go no further and the Hand burst. The number of phages released was beyond belief, but you counted them, meticulously, with your half learned skills from the

Clerks, and there were seventy-three in total. It took a very long time to find and carefully bury them all. Then you climbed onto the truncated wrist and looked down at the remnant of the Hand, now inert, safe to be near. The whole palm had gone, flesh turned into phages by the injected poison and skin ripped asunder by the swelling and force of the explosion. It had been eaten away down to the level of the bones. The long finger bones, half dissolved and eaten, were hollowed out, and as you stared down at them, that novel view generated in your head the wildest idea that your mind could ever manage to contain.

Do you remember that brainwave? After the shock of finding yourself on an island, it had been knitted together from the memories of the swimming motions of the Aquatics floating comfortably on the surface of the sea, the path of the hole-in-the-sky during your jaunt around, your desire to escape from this boring world and the sight of the hollowed out finger bones. They all merged into one throbbing headache. It took time to unravel the idea, but once you had managed a firm grasp of it, you acted upon it. First, you dug out the longest of the long bones (it was as long as you were) and dragged it to the sea and washed it, carefully rinsing out the cavity, and took it to a section of vine where you could leave it to dry out, up away from the sand that would dissolve it as it dissolved all dead matter. And then you waited, waited for it to dry and for the night to come. As the dimming purple light from the hole-in-the-sky disappeared behind the mountain and all other

people were properly falling asleep, you, alone, prepared for a journey.

Are you still with me? Don't fall asleep again. This is your own story, after all. Are you still remembering how you took the hollowed-out bone to the shore, and climbed right into it? And sitting there, how you pushed off with the Athletes' stick until you were clear of the shoreline and then paddled out further from the shore with your hands? On and on, you paddled. Looking back, you could see the faintly glowing outline of the island and this kept you on track. As long as the island was behind you, you were leaving it. What was your idea then? The impossible? That you would reach the end of the sea just as the hole-in-the-sky came up and you would jump out through the hole-in-the-sky to the world beyond and be free? That was some plan for a Vine-keeper. Only one of the Clerks could have constructed such an idea, but then they are too frail to dream of carrying it out. But, don't forget, you had secretly drunk from their exquisite little pods. Only an Athlete had the strength to attempt such a feat, although one of them could never have imagined doing such a thing. But you had eaten of their pulsing, fleshy pods. You had even sucked on the glutinous cream in the pods of the Aquatics to help you to float. So, you had learned to count and plan, learned to run and jump and even learned to float in the water, although you had only practised that on empty stretches of beach, away from the vines and never near the Aquatics, who made you squirm and cringe inside.

Finally, you were nearing exhaustion. After

endless strokes with your sore arms rubbing on the rough side of the bone, stinging from the salt in the water, bent almost double, plunging first your right hand into the water almost level with your feet, and then pulling it backwards until it was behind you, and then repeating with the left, you actually approached the dark sky where it meets the sea. Quite by accident, I'm sure, your timing and aim were impeccable. The hole-in-the-sky was just about to rise, at exactly that place. The sea began to swirl, rocking your unstable craft, then to boil, leaping up the fibres of the sky and splashing down again. Then the hole-in-the-sky appeared, moving gigantically upwards, brightening as it came, blindingly even while purple, after the night of darkness, overturning the bone and throwing you into the eddying water. Under water you couldn't breathe, you struggled valiantly until you passed out, and that was the end of your attempt to leave the island. And that is all you could know of your greatest adventure. Therefore, it needs to be added to the record for clarity, that while unconscious, you floated, pushed by the mild current that moved away from the rising sky, face up luckily, all the way back to the beach, where you were deposited on a stretch of empty sand. And here you still are.

Only one question remains. Did you, at least, manage to catch a glimpse of the outside world through the hole-in-the-sky before falling into the sea and going under? It couldn't have been too blindingly bright, because on the horizon the outer fire shows as a dim purple. Can you remember anything? What did you see out there? Does the

memory of it tempt you to try to escape again?

PART 2

So! Where have you ended up, now? You're all black and burnt. You just lie there, waiting to die. Feeling lost, emptied and abandoned. Collapsed from starvation and exhaustion and pressed down by the intense heat from above. The pains from your strenuous efforts and the burning of the fire envelope your body. As you are in such a torment of emotional anguish and physical pain, you are close to abandoning this venture of yours, so we had better review those steps that led you here.

You were on the beach, remember? Coming round from your abortive attempt to reach the hole-in-the-sky as it rose out of the sea. Half-drowned, exhausted and hungry. But inside you a fire burned because you had had a glimpse of the world outside. Not much, its true. Just a tiny glimpse of a great, flat plain beneath an endless sky of fire. You sat yourself up, gazing out to sea towards the horizon where you had experienced your vision of the outside world. Completely alone, you were, on that piece of empty beach, gazing at the almost invisible line where the blue sea meets the blue sky. Absent mindedly your eyes followed the horizon around to the right until it was met by the shore, then up the

rising beach, then up the flank of the mountain and finally your eyes rested on the mountaintop, where it shimmered and shone in the light from the hole-in-the-sky that was, by that time, hanging resplendently above it. The sight was so overpoweringly awesome that an electric discharge travelled through your body, coursing up and down and up and down, and then to cap it all, a voice, so soft, so sweet, so utterly sweet and beautiful, like the tinkling of tiny drops of purest water into a mirrored pool, came as if from inside you and said:

"You must scale the mountain, to achieve your quest."

With the reverberations from the thrill of this voice still echoing around inside you, with all your hairs standing on end, you stood quickly up, turning this way and that, trying to find the source of the voice. But, as you already knew, there was nobody near you. The voice really had come from your own inner depths.

Who was it that had spoken? In such delectable, dulcet tones? Such a haunting quality of voice you had never heard before. And what about its message? Could it be true? Up the mountain? You had no real choice but to accept it, to prepare yourself and to obey.

Your acceptance was instantaneous and wholehearted. Next came, of course, the preparation. Having just washed-up from one adventure, you were hardly in a state to plunge straight on into another. You needed both food and rest. As you moved towards the nearest of the vine

trunks rising out of the sea, you passed the remains of the Hand, a tacit reminder of your recent past debacle. It was now sunken in the sand, half dissolved. In a day or two it would be gone and that episode of shame would, at least, be lost from view.

Arriving at the roots of the vine emerging from the sea, you took two creamy, fat-laden pods and gradually squeezed their sickly-sweet contents into your mouth. The Aquatics nearby murmured together, but didn't complain about you taking their food. You now had an off-putting air of determination about you. The rich cream fed and empowered you as you moved away from the shoreline and followed the vine up the beach to where the Athletes were competing. After a brief nod of greeting, you took three of their pods, to chew on the energy-rich, fibrous flesh within. Withdrawing some distance along the vine, you sat and ate, drank water and then slept.

When you awoke you returned to the shore and ate two more creamy pods, and on passing took three more fleshy ones from the Athletes and began to climb. Following the vine upwards, the ascent was easy to begin with as the slope was not very great and you had done it many times before. When you stopped to snack on some of the squat Vine-keepers' stodgy pods, you fell asleep. Awakening, you pushed on up the slope until you arrived back at your own station. Here, halfway up, amid the familiar surroundings of your previous life, you over-ate and over-slept, sleeping the whole night through, and so completed the preparations for your ascent of the mountain in obedience to the sweet,

inner voice. Can you just recall how each time you drank from a tinkling rivulet or small pool of sweet water, you were reminded of that sweet, tinkling voice?

Do you still remember that feeling and drive now, installed in you by the musicality of the voice that was leading you? Your absolute certainty of success with which you started out? Not that you had not been up in that direction before. You had. So you knew that the pods of the Clerks and those above became increasingly smaller and more difficult to find as you progressed up the vine, so you cleverly took your fill of your own pods before you set out. Climbing was soon becoming more difficult as the angle of the sand increased, but you were able to push on using the noticeably smaller side-branches of the vine as support. When you arrived at the level of the Clerks, where each one sat separately, engaged in some problem of tallying or arranging or planning or logic using their dried pods as counters, you stopped for a rest, drinking from some of their small, concentrated pods for energy. This taking of some of their pods caused a frantic round of recalculation in the sand, although nobody complained to you or tried to stop you. After a long drink and a short rest you continued the ascent. On reaching the top line of the Clerks, that of the Judges, you knew what to expect when one sprang up in front of you and ordered you to go back down.

This time, however, you were being driven on by a higher authority, that sweet, inner voice. You ignored the Judge, walked around him and carried on up. From behind you he spoke. “That way is

not for you, Vine-keeper. Nobody from your level can expect to return from the mountain top."

What could you do? Defy your sweet, inner voice? No. You had to continue. So you defied the Judge, who made no physical attempt to stop you. Now you were on fresh ground, you had never been so high before. The sand underfoot was becoming far steeper and you stopped and looked back at the wide expanse below you, with the green of the vine clearly running down the yellow sand all the way to the blue of the sea. You marvelled at this glorious sweeping, curving panorama. From lower heights there was always some undulation of sand or vine-trunk in the way and such vistas were not possible. Next to you, on the shrunken vine you found a tiny, wild pod. Its juice was very intensely sweet and burning and you had to drink a lot of water from a rivulet to wash it down. It made your head swim.

At this level there had been no attempt to cultivate the vine. All the trunks, that were now merely branches, kept low to the ground and seemed to be interlacing together into a grand, encircling, lawless mesh. The leaves were small, the occasional pods even smaller. Between and under the weave of the mesh ran tiny rivulets of the purest water dancing down from the peak towards the sea far below. Up there the air was thin and the light, as the hole-in-the-sky was still near to being directly overhead, was blindingly brilliant. This was the fabled place of the Mystics. A skeletal crew who sat in meditation, or contemplation, on the deeper matters concerning the whole mountain. They sat in a widely-spaced ring above the rest of

the world, continuously looking downwards and outwards without meeting or communicating together and without ever speaking aloud. The ring of the Mystics “felt” all that happened, down to each and every developing pod or phage attack, on the mountain. That was the story, anyway. At this level, you had to progress on all fours, the mountain was steep and the dry sand fell away easily under foot or hand. You found another small pod and drank it. It felt like you were drinking fire and turned your head around. You had to rest, and slipped into a dreamless sleep.

You didn't wake up until it was dark. Remember that? You could see nothing but a faint iridescence about you. You drank from, and dowsed your head in, a rivulet of cold, clean water. As you began again to scramble your way up, needing no light beyond the iridescence of the sand, you found the task becoming much more difficult. The direction was easy, always upwards but the steepness, the need to hold on to what little remained of the vine to keep from sliding back down, and the exhaustion from what you had already managed were beginning to tell on you. You were about to stop again, to rest, when a major incident occurred which is, however, difficult to exactly define.

You heard a voice. No, not the sweet voice, not even sounding like that or any other one voice, but a chorus of voices. It boomed about you. Then stretched, diminishing, around the mountain, passing whisperingly yet still audibly behind it and coming back round the other way with renewing force to where you stood. The combined voice had

a very deep tone, deeper than any voice you had ever heard before. The circulating depth contained an admonition, its message was simple, “Eat nothing, or you will die.” As the message continued to fly around the mountain, carried by the chain of voices, and back again, you marvelled. Around it went, intoning, again and again. You sat in awe and confusion, not being able to continue. So you rolled over onto your back, spreading your arms and legs for support, and slept.

The hole-in-the-sky woke you as it rose up the sky, shining into your eyes. No pods showed themselves at this height, so there was no temptation to defy the deep echoing voice by eating. You drank and washed in one of the sparkling, cold rivulets that rutted the angled sand. The going became more difficult now, because the vine trunks, which farther down had become branches had now become little more than tendrils and progress was only possible by laying flat, with your belly against the sand, and digging in each limb separately and hauling yourself up. Not that you didn't slip back at times or have to move sideways to bypass a patch of empty sand where the rivulets of water, although firming the loose sand, could wash down your footholds and handholds. For the whole day you proceeded like this in the heat, with only small rests, until the hole-in-the-sky had passed well over to the other side of the mountain and you were moving within its shadow. Looking up at the silhouetted mountaintop, which still seemed so far away, you despaired. The higher you went, the slower the progress. It just didn't seem possible any

more. Doubt crept into your mind. Surely that peak could never be reached?

That's when you saw it. Do you remember that? The vine that remained at that height had become so fine, that the whitened tips and tiny leaves were almost translucent. One tip of a vine tendril just above you behaved oddly, seemed to pulsate. A tiny white movement, showing luminously in the shading of the mountain. Clearly, it was a part of the now white vine, but was able to detach itself and flutter around from tip to tip. As you watched it, just beyond your out-stretched hand, a strange fascination came over you. As the only other living thing at this height on the mountain, you wanted to make contact with it, to somehow commune with it. It toyed with you, teasingly. Both your climb to the peak and the sweet, inner voice were forgotten as you scrambled about in the sand trying to catch this little flying wisp. Sliding down, clawing back up, all was given to the chase of this tiny, playful distraction that always fluttered just out of reach.

Then you recalled the sweet voice and your quest and you were devastated by the memory. It hit you like some terrific blow about the head. Remember? How could you have forgotten? How could you have been led astray by the temptations of such a silly little flutterer? You re-resolved and composed yourself. You took a deep breath and continued to inch your way up, lying your body full length on the sand to keep a grip on it, digging in hands and feet, using wet sand from around the rivulets to try to firm up the holds. The fluttering thing, as if realising it had been abandoned, came closer to you,

tempting you, tantalising you. As you inched your way upwards, it danced just out of reach, flitting from vine tip to sand and back again, just beyond your fingertips as they probed the steeply sloping sand for grip. Finally, it settled on the back of your hand, just like that, while your fingers desperately groped at the dry sand. Very slowly, so as not to disturb it, you brought it close to your face. You studied it - that little white, wispy thing.

And then – calamity - what happened? How did you do that? How could you have allowed it to happen? The little creature fluttered towards your nose. You stared stupidly, cross-eyed, open-mouthed. It landed on your tongue and with a tiny hiss, dissolved. Too late, you closed your mouth. Too late, you rose up on your knees, though still leaning inwards towards the sand. The deed was done. Saddened, perhaps more by the loss of your little companion than by the defying of the deep voice, you continued to climb. Back-sliding – climbing – back-sliding – climbing, until exhaustion overtook you, and you slept. You slept just as you were, face down, with hands and feet buried deep into the steeply sloping sand.

As you awoke, disheartened, disillusioned, the hole-in-the-sky was rising behind you. Turning your back to the mountain you bathed in the widening panorama of the scene before you. Surely, you couldn't be far from the top? The whole island appeared to be spread out below you by this time, with its shoreline curving steadily around, to disappear behind this final tip of unconquered sand behind you. Lying on your back, with your heels

and palms digging into the sand, you felt a little more stable, less likely to slip down, so you carried on climbing in this fashion. Pushing up with your feet and hands, then wriggling your back, shoulders and head higher, stretching your arm and legs, pulling up your knees and then repeating and repeating.

By the time the hole-in-the-sky was overhead, bringing the light and heat to their utmost, you had stopped to drink awkwardly from a rivulet that was gushing up and out from the sand next to you. It was very cold and wonderfully refreshing. It was then, as you threw handfuls of water at your mouth, that you noticed that the skin of your arms and chest was covered with a fine, white down of hair. Once noticed, you saw that it was everywhere, legs, stomach and even, you could just feel the threads of it, on your face. You had to put this new complication out of your mind, and steadied yourself back into the climbing position. Palms and heels, head and back needed to be independently raised by this time. Slowly, you rose up the mountain, one limb at a time, until, quite suddenly it seemed, the pressure on the back of your head was gone. Then there was no pressure on your neck, then not even on your shoulders. You turned, to see what new trick this was, what hole in the sand you were about to fall into, and found yourself looking down the brightly lit, far side of the mountain, all the way to the distant shore.

Lifting yourself to a sitting position on the very peak, sat within a ring of tiny springing rivulets of cold water, you were able to turn around and around

to see that, for sure, the island was an island. It was completely circular, with the mountain rising squarely, right in the middle. The sea in all directions was completely unbroken all the way to the sky. Of course, you could have seen it all a bit better, if it wasn't for those white threads that were falling into your eyes. Then, looking down, you could see that the fluffy white down on your body had become definite hairs, and they were everywhere, but you wouldn't let a seemingly small matter like that dampen your enthusiasm. For you had succeeded. You had finished the quest given to you by the sweet, small voice. You had managed to climb all the way to the very top of the mountain.

As you gloried quietly to yourself, it struck you. Now what? What had all this effort been about? Why should you have climbed all that way? Now that the hole-in-the-sky was sinking well down the sky in front of you, and shadows were stretching out behind you, with all other people and even the whole of the vine far, far below, you were deflated by the seeming pointlessness of the climb. The sweet voice had brought you to this point and then? What next? You could find no answer for that. No sweet voice spoke to you now. Curling up on you side, into a ball that just about balanced on top of the world, the recent continuous outlay of energy drew you down into a deep sleep. While you slept the white hairs, some quite thick by then and creating sub-hairs of their own, continued to grow, until your whole body was covered from sight – if, of course, there had been anyone else up so high to see you, that is.

You awoke within a great whiteness. You could see nothing but white. You tried to break out of this condition, but your arms and legs felt lashed down. You tried to wriggle but it had little effect. You had shooting pains in your back and searing ones in your shoulders that you couldn't account for. Then, as time moved on while you stayed helplessly immobile, unable to react to this situation in any way, you perceived that an extra brightness existed in the whiteness surrounding you and that, over time, it appeared as if it very slowly moved. There was no sense of up or down, or of motion or weight as you were, but very slowly the patch of increased brightness moved around you. The pains in your shoulders continued, keeping you awake. The rest of your body felt uselessly limp, and you were unable to move any part of it. Time would have seemed to stand still but for that extra brightness which slid very gradually along, imperceptibly. Then a change did come. Slowly, the brightness began to fade, then slowly, the whiteness began to fade to light grey and then to grey and then to dark grey. Then, slowly, all was black. You slept.

As consciousness returned, you saw that the whiteness had also returned, accompanied by the brightness. You made a valiant effort to break that which bound you, but to no avail. Not one part of your body could be stirred. Not even your eyes, which had the whitenesses and brightnesses thrust upon them with no ability to decline the sight. Still that pain was in your shoulders though, nagging and pulling, not letting you rest comfortably in this state. Again the brightness, very slowly, began to

move across the face of the whiteness. The stretch of time was unbearable. Day upon day must be passing you thought. You had no future, there was nothing to look forward to, but the worsening of the pangs of thirst and that infinitely slow march of the spot of brightness. You despaired and despaired and despaired, all alone, in silence.

Eventually, the brightness had passed and the whiteness began to fade and that is when something changed. The grip upon your body began to relax. You were able to make small movements with your fingers, then hands and feet, then arms and legs and then torso and head. Slowly you stretched each limb, exercising the joints and getting the feeling back. You rolled your head, gently, noticing the enforced stiffness. As you started to work your upper back, you found your shoulders heavy and unresponsive as if they were still tied down. You wriggled them, trying harder and harder against the holding force until with a swishing noise the darkening world opened up before you. Rubbing your eyes brought a flurry of white dust. Brushing off your face brought more. You tried to sit up, but one shoulder still pulled, wickedly. You shifted your weight and managed to sit as you brushed the dust off your arms and chest. There before you was the familiar world. You were still perched on the top of the mountain, the familiar hole-in-the-sky was going down in front of you, nothing seemed to have changed out there. You surmised, in a flash of intelligence, that the moving patch of brightness in the whiteness had only been the hole-in-the-sky rising and setting twice with the dark night between.

But that wasn't the problem. Nothing out there in the world in front of you was the problem, the problem was much closer, and behind you. You slowly stood on your feet, shaking yourself, continuing to brush yourself off, looking down at the piles of discarded white dust gathering on the yellow sand at the top of the world.

That is when you realised that your balance was a bit off. You had to fight against a tendency to lean backwards because your shoulders constantly pulled backwards and downwards. Lifting your hands to your neck and shoulders to brush off more of the white dust that was obviously causing such a discrepancy, you discovered something strange. In fact, two strange somethings, that were clinging to your upper back. At the points where your shoulder blades should have been, two large things had attached themselves to you, gripping on, hanging down your back almost to your feet. You grasped one in both hands and tried to pull it off, but it hurt too much. Do you remember? And what was the amazing thing? What was that supreme surprise that transcended any belief? It hurt on your shoulder where it was attached but it also hurt from within the thing itself. You felt the pulling through it, as though it was a part of you. Had you ever before in your entire life been as shocked as that? As you now well know, it and its mate were your wings, but at that time you had never known of such a thing before. Even less could you imagine what a pair of them could do. You sat down, drinking heavily from water in cupped hands from one of the rivulets that had erupted near you. You should also

have been very hungry, you hadn't eaten for days and had lost a lot of weight, but that didn't seem to bother you. Anyway, you had wings, instead, didn't you?

As the light in the sky faded away, you began to experiment with the wings, first gently moving them around you, then in and out and then up and down, then folding and unfolding them, then sweeping them backwards and forwards, changing their angle to the air with each sweep. For hours you played with them, never imagining for a moment what their true purpose could be. The whole night was consumed in this way as you learned to control the motion of the wings and learned to understand the feelings of air-pressure, position and movement that came back from them. Finally, as the hole-in-the-sky began to rise up the sky, exhausted, you folded the wings, one under you and one on top, and in the created whiteness fell into a deep sleep. While you slept, your body twitched, first an arm, then a leg, then a wing as the back of your mind went into state of heightened activity trying to collate all the new information gained during the night.

By the time you awoke, and drank and doused your head with sweet water and stretched your wings, night had fallen. Some new determination had entered you during sleep. A new potential was itching to be tried out. You flapped your wings very hard, much harder than you had dared or even imagined that you could have the previous night. You flapped faster and faster and harder and harder, gradually changing the pitch of your wings, and you

actually rose up into the air. Do you remember the amazement? As you felt the soft sand leaving your feet you realised what had happened, so you stopped flapping and fell the short distance back down, but missed the peak and slid a short distance down the mountain on the sand. Surely you can't forget that? The effect was electrifying. You climbed to your knees and flapped again, lifting off again and this time managed to deposit yourself accurately back onto the peak in a squat. Do I need to remind you that after that, the whole night was spent in practice? How to take off into the air, how to turn left or right, how to rise or fall while in the air, and the all-important – how to land under control? All the time learning from the specific feel of the air on the wings during the differing conditions. Then, as the hole-in-the-sky once more began to rise up the sky, you were overtaken with exhaustion, and lying down again, fell into another deep sleep of analysis and twitches. And so yet another night and another day passed by without food.

Again, as if on cue, as the light was rapidly fading, you woke up. This time you were violent with the wings, forcing them into tight curves and sudden swooping dives from which you needed all your strength to pull up. During these exercises, your only guides were the faint iridescence of the sand which covered the whole mountain and the certain knowledge that there was nothing else anywhere near you that you could collide with. Your final flight was a test of endurance, straight out until you were over the sea. As you turned in

the air, the whole island was visible as a glowing silhouette, and as you returned, you imagined, as if they were awake during the daytime, each group of sleeping people, you passed over. Remember? The Aquatics, wallowing in the shallows with their creamy pods. The Athletes, running and jumping on the beach with their chewy, fleshy pods. The Vine-keepers, first those low on the mountain, squat and thick set with stodgy, pulpy pods and then taller and more refined above with the most perfect pods. (Your level, of course.) The Clerks, high on the mountain, variously tallying, comparing, merging, planning and judging, a skinny group washing down their overly-concentrated pods with plenty of water. Then the fabled Mystics, in a ring near the top both unseen and unknown, living, if on anything at all, on those wild, burning pods. And then, you, landing on the very top with perfect skill and composure into a cross-legged position, living solely on the purest water. In all this world, spread out below you, with the Hand well absorbed by now, the only stain you had seen was the Phages. Randomly attacking, lying dormant for ages, trapped amongst the vine stems, ready to scratch and infect the unwary.

You sat in the dark, looking out to where you knew the hole-in-the-sky would rise. You were quiescent now, resting, waiting. All the questions had fallen into place and been answered, you knew what had to be done. So far you had not been seen by anyone on the island, all your flights were done in the dark while they were asleep, but now you planned a flight during the day. As the faintest

glimmer of activity showed on the horizon in front of you, you curled up and slept.

When you awoke the hole-in-the-sky was already almost directly overhead. You panicked. Was it too late? Had you slept for too long? You quickly drank a long draught of water and launched yourself upwards. Now was the culmination of your plan to escape through the hole-in-the-sky. You rose on long sweeping wing-beats, spiralling straight up into the air, higher and higher, up into the heat and light that were beating down upon you. Below the mountaintop receded, steadily flattening out to join the rest of the island far below you. More wing-beats. You could feel that sense of freedom pouring down upon you from above along with the stifling heat and light. The days without food and the metamorphosis had left you much lighter in frame, the long beats of your wings carried you easily upwards, but still the goal seemed so far away. Flap after flap – soon you would be there, but no. The hole-in-the-sky always seemed so far away. Gradually you began to tire as you spiralled upwards. The effort of continuous, near vertical flight was beginning to tell on you. The heat and light pressing down from above were becoming an active hindrance. You squinted quickly up. Were you closer? You looked down. You must be closer, for below, the whole island looked impossibly small and far away.

You pulled your wings down against the pressure of the air - fold, lift and repeat – it was becoming difficult to hold the rhythm against your exhaustion and the heat pummelling you from above. It was

becoming difficult to suck in enough air to power the muscles of the wings, perhaps the air was becoming thinner up there, or perhaps because the air was hotter, your lungs were less inclined to fully accept it? You were in real suffering now. Each wing-beat was a monumental effort of will, the heat and blinding light from above just couldn't be tolerated. Were you really beginning to fail? You were close to skipping a beat of the wings, or to letting the air pressure forcibly reverse the angle of a wing and drop you through the air. One more beat should do it, but then just one more beat, and again just one more beat. When your shoulder suddenly hit something solid, you almost fell from the sky, in surprise. Turning about, you instinctively grasped at whatever it was. It was rough and lumpy, with fibrous holds that could be used by hands and feet. It was the edge of the hole-in-the-sky.

Clinging on desperately, wings hanging limply down behind, the light and heat from the outer fire above pressing down upon you, trying to push you off your perch, you could feel yourself withering under the intense pressure. But as you pressed yourself flat against the side of the hole, you felt a slight relief, and realised that there was some shadow close to the wall. Pushing your head against the wall into one pool of shadow you looked around, and saw that you were in a large fibrous tunnel. What you could see of your body was badly burnt and blackened. Above roared the outer fire, while downwards, so, so far below was the island, looking so, so tiny. With your head in the shadow, taking a bit of a breather from the greatest heat, you

could understand that the hole-in-the-sky was just now starting on its long descent towards the sea, hence, luckily, the beginnings of a shadow was forming on your side. Then, above the roaring and hissing associated with the heat, you heard again the small, sweet voice, "Help me!" The tinkling tones had called out to you in anguish.

All your remaining mental force called you to push on, only your suffering body would have called for more rest, but it was silent. Up you went, into the heat, into the light, climbing up the side of the tunnel. Searching for each hand-hold or foot-hold in turn, shoulders and back and wings on fire. The climb was at a steady rate, the imperative was upon you, it had to be completed quickly and there ought to be no slackening or mistakes. Finally, the shadow began to reduce from your hands and then disappeared altogether. You were emerging from the top. You clambered painfully out. You were standing on the top of the sky. Remember that? The heat and the light from overhead beat violently down upon you. You tried to shield yourself with your wings, but they were horribly burnt, their pristine whiteness blackened and crinkling up. But still they were able to join with your hands to shield your eyes enough for you to open them and see.

Through the blinding light and the wisps of smoke and steam coming from the sizzling skin of your arms, back and wings you could see the hugeness of this ultimate panorama. The fire above stretched in an unbroken sheet in every direction, turning yellow then orange then red and finally purple in the distance. Below it, equivalently, a

huge plain of green, bluing and greying and darkening as it stretched away. Thrusting up from this plain, covering it as far as the eye could see, at random intervals, were enormous pale balls elevated and held aloft by gigantically magnified trunks, resembling those of the vine as they rose from the sea. With a gasp, in a flash of inspiration, you realised that you were now standing on the top of one of those balls, and that they must all be containing skies and islands, peopled as yours was. You stared, amazed, turning round and round, drinking in the delightful sight. Could anything have brought you out of that reverie? Only one event could have eclipsed and cap that view. Do you remember as it happened? Could you ever forget it?

You felt a motion close behind you. A stirring as of a breeze blowing across your back. A slight pull as if something was gently easing itself from between your wings, something which half-floated and half-swam around to stand in front of you, seeming, almost, to regard you. Was it smoke? It had a billowing motion. Was it light? It was bright, even against the upper fire. Was it flame? It had an endless twist and involution within itself. It was the most beautiful vision you had ever experienced. You were overwhelmed, you wanted to embrace it. Then the sweet, sweet voice came forth from it, saying those words you will never be able to forget, "I must leave you now, and return to my home in the upper fire. Your body is slowly dying and I may not stay with you in it. But do not grieve, for I shall return." With this it left you, gracefully turning

round before moving rapidly away from you, at first horizontally and then upwards. You watched it shrinking and disappearing as it arched upwards into the great fire that was now your sky. Left behind, lingering, as if still floating in the air were the sweet words, "...I shall return..."

PART 3

So! How can we justify what has happened to you now? The condition in which you find yourself, stuck awkwardly into the grassy plain beneath the unforgiving upper fire, is quite beyond any reasonable acceptance. Your physical state defies immediate description, your reduced mental state could only be attributed to frozen, petrified anger. How could you have allowed yourself to arrive at such a pass? Once again, we had better look back with our wonderful power of hindsight to see what exactly has brought about such a woeful situation. Where, then, had we left you?

Oh, yes. You are perched on top of the world. Having finally achieved your goal of leaving that dissatisfying life into which you were born. Are you happy? Are you now fulfilled? No! Not you. Never mind her, now. Before you ever knew of her you were determined to leave that world. When you tried to enter the hole-in-the-sky at the edge of

the sea, you knew nothing of her. Your whole life was an attempt to escape from the dreariness of that very same life. Yes, yes, alright! Now she has gone. But, at least, she made you a pledge, she promised to return.

So, there you are, watching the swirling image of the bearer of your so sweet voice disappear into the upper fire. Before you were even aware, before you felt her detach from your back, she had gently withdrawn from your innards, from those secret parts deep within you, leaving behind a spiritual gap and an immeasurable sense of loss. You know, now, after she has left you, that she had always been your constant companion. From inside you, she was guiding you when you were lost, encouraging you when you felt hopeless and comforting you in your times of pain and anguish.

That ethereal being knew you better than you knew yourself. That inner feeling of support and care, that you had always felt, until now, was just her love. It was this love which you had drawn upon to flout the rules of the island and it was this love which had saved you from that Hand, and it was this love that had had to watch over you, and keep you afloat, when you had overturned the finger bone way out to sea. You came to rely on this love to defend you from the consequences of your unthinking actions. Such blatant negativities that you allowed to persist in your character were erroneously bolstered by her positive support. However, she was valiantly supporting the right in you, not the wrong. Is it any surprise that she left you, after your sorry performance, really? But, then

again, at least she made a pledge, she promised to return.

Let us remember how it used to be, because now the heat and light are pounding mercilessly down upon you, searing your flesh, distorting your limbs, while you wallow in self pity, feeling robbed and abandoned. When you were young and care-free and you broke the rules and visited other groups because you were bored with the life you had, she never tried to stop you. She never said, “no.” Even if she didn't agree, she went along with you and watched over you. Perhaps, we ought now to see, from this point, that she may have used the mouths of others to try to pass messages to you from outside yourself. Trying, through them, to give you the information that you, in your blindness and ignorance, so obviously needed. Not that you ever listened to anybody else, either. When the Athletes, prompted by her, told you of their ancestor who ran right round the beach, perhaps you were supposed to understand that that meant that there was no tempting dream-world beyond the mountain. Too subtle for you, though, remember? Instead, you missed the point completely, turning it into a quest. You never listened properly to anyone she spoke through. And now you're angry that she's gone? Really? But, at least, she made a pledge, she promised to return.

In this searing heat, up on top of the sky, your body is being bent and twisted by the tortuous pull of the charring of its tissues, your spine is curling up, your head is being forced down into your chest, and your hips are being pulled up to enclose it and

your useless limbs are splaying outwards at impossible angles. So, when you started grooming the giant pod, she didn't try to stop you, even if she agreed with, and spoke through, the voices around you saying that it was horribly wrong. She understood that you lacked a proper respect for your adult life, you were infantile. When the giant hand finally fell out, she was with you as you took it away from the group and fed it and tended to it, pushing on stubbornly against any sense. Even when it eventually attacked you, she was there, planning with you, trying to lead you out of that mess of your own creation and into safety. And now you resent the fact that she has gone? What could you expect after such roguish treatment? How would you yourself have reacted to such? Quite! Still, at least she made a pledge, she promised to return.

How long can you last up here? The light and heat are penetrating deeply through your skin, drying up your vital juices. Those pure white wings of which you were so proud, symbols of your hard-earned freedom, that came to you from the little white flutterer that dissolved on your tongue, are now reduced to charred straps, helping to bind you more tightly, mere chains of your self-imposed prison, aiding the forces that are folding and squeezing your body into a blackened, contorted lump. A lump vaguely tetrahedral in form, as your stumpy, folded limbs poke oddly out.

So, when you saw the hollowed out bone of the Hand and had your brainwave about reaching the hole-in-the-sky over the sea, she didn't try to stop

you, or whisper that it was dangerous, or attempt to redirect your thoughts. That silly idea was your own choice and she followed it meekly even to the point of having to keep you on your back and breathing all the way back to shore while you were unconscious. And now you are angry, you feel your sense of loss, you feel robbed, as if a possession of yours has been wrongly taken from you. But when so much selfless love departs from within you, what could you be left with but the most bitter hatred? What could such emptiness feel, but an icy cold anger over its utter abandonment by its contents? Don't forget that it was you who taught her to live the life of a rebel. Why be so hurt when she, in turn, rebels against you? Anyway, at least she made a pledge, she promised to return.

So, you are trying to move before you completely sizzle up and die in place. Your legs and arms have been bent double by the tightening of your burnt wings, skin and sinews. Your head has been forcefully rammed forwards and downwards into your heart, while your hips have curled up and covered all. The remains of you shows as a blackened ball with four blackened, stumpy legs, like a pyramid with a triangular base. Yes, I know what you are thinking. It was her who urged you to climb the mountain. How could we forget? That glorious moment was the first time she had spoken directly to you, because your desire to leave that world far behind you was so overwhelmingly strong. She didn't necessarily have to agree with the idea, but any other course of action at that time could have been even more disastrous. She didn't

explain the full consequences, though. No. You are right on that point. But you wouldn't have listened, anyway, even if she had. How many times had you ignored the words she had put into other people's mouths? She merely pointed out the only way for you to achieve your desire, as you had so ably demonstrated out at sea that to leave the world was all that you had ever wanted from life. Therefore here you are, you have left your life on the island and you have completely left the world as you so fervently desired. So be happy. But, of course, you are angry because she has also left you and returned to her home in the upper fire. Well? It was you, after all, who taught her the way of ingratitude. Then again, at least she made a pledge, she promised to return.

So, now you are crawling painfully, with what little freedom you have left in your body, towards the direction she took. You know you can't go up there with her though, don't you? Fire burns and purifies everything. You are exactly that kind of dross which gets burnt off by it. That is why you are all black and twisted. The light and heat will not let you survive even just up here much longer. How much less could you live with her in the upper fire? Do you really believe that she tricked you into coming up here just to allow her escape from you into that fire? Can't you see that she was a free agent? That she could have come up into the fire at anytime, from any place while you were still inside the world? If she had let you drown while out at sea, she would have come straight back up into the upper fire. What do you think happens when

somebody, ordinarily, dies in the world? Their body is absorbed by the sand and its goodness is washed back down to the sea to feed the vine, and their higher spirit springs back up to the upper fire whence it has come. Instead of taking her chance of escape, by letting you die, she repeatedly saved your life. So it doesn't appear she was in any hurry to get back to the fire, does it? Alright, yes, now she is there. Even so, she did, at least, make a pledge, she promised to return.

You'll need to drag yourself along a bit faster than that. Your body will seize up completely soon. That's it, try to channel your rage. Make use of that frozen anger. Feed your belligerence into your muscles to move you on. You didn't listen to the Judge when he told you to turn back. You didn't listen to the Mystics when you were told not to eat anything. So what makes you think you would have listened to her if she had tried to dissuade you? You would have ignored her just as you did everybody else that spoke for her. What has happened to you in your life is all your own doing, resulting from your own freewill and driven under your own impetus. All the decisions were yours to make. So why should you now be so packed full of hatred? Or perhaps just being empty of her is enough. In her noble place burns this cold, ignoble, frozen anger. Equally as cold as the upper fire is hot. But, at least, she made a pledge, she promised to return.

That's it! That's it! Keep going. The curve on the top of the world you now “stand” on is becoming more pronounced, soon you will start moving more easily down the outside of the world.

There, you are starting to slip. This new twisted shape of yours is good for sliding and rolling at least. Faster and faster, down the increasing slope, bumping a bit on your stumpy limbs which are, in fact, your elbows and knees, because your arms and legs have been folded double by the shrinkage of your skin and sinews from the searing heat. With a last bump, you are free-falling downwards through the air towards that rich green plain below. But can't you feel the coolness in the air flow? At last! Now we are getting somewhere. She has gone up to her fire where she belongs and you are falling down to the earth where you belong. Down to that fair, green plain that you managed to glimpse through the Hole-in-the-sky and saw again, momentarily, from the top of the world, before she left you, and your eyes burst in the heat and ran down your face. Of course, you can only see it as a memory now, the remains of your eyes have gone inwards with the rest of your head, when your skull merged into your ribcage and your hips were forced over the top of them. Can you feel that wonderfully cool dampness rising up from the plain? You're almost there.

Bump! Bounce. Spin. Bounce – spin – bounce, and you are down, rolling down the bank pushed up by the mighty roots of what was once your world. Turning over and over, downwards you go, until you come to rest in the lush, damp grass of the plain. Your new blackened form is not completely immobile as you will discover if you stop whining over what you have lost, and look to what you still have. This is not the place for wallowing in self-pity. You desperately wanted to leave that world,

and now you have. To another of the Vine-keepers, you would look like a ball with three stumpy supports angling downwards from your lower half, holding you up and one sticking straight up on top. To a Clerk, who knows all about shapes, you resemble the innards of a tetrahedron before the neat, triangular sides are fixed into place.

But within that form you still have the same disobedient, questing mind that was prepared to risk everything to know how the world was made. So, now you know. Enjoy that knowledge, revel in it. After all, you fought hard enough to get it. You sacrificed everything for it. So! That great ball of the sky turns. Inside it the seawater, drawn up the trunk by the roots on which it stands, half fills it. Meanwhile, from the friction of the mass of sand that composes the island inside it, the inner surface is scraped and eroded to a smooth mud. This adds to the size of the island as the newly created mud along with sea water is drawn up inside the mountain, by the action of the upper fire shining through the hole-in-the-sky, and is then released from its summit as purified sand and fresh water to trickle down its flanks. That is why the water and sand of the mountain are always fresh. At the same time on the outside of the ball, the mighty roots have drawn up water and nutrients from the soil, holding them at the top of the trunk as a pool of rich soup, in which the sky-ball floats and turns allowing a thin coating to be continually added to its outside with each revolution. All this you have worked out, despite your overwhelming physical difficulties, and it is quite accurate, that is how a world grows.

But how it can begin in the first place? The answer to that is one of your two, great mysteries.

The other great mystery, for you, is Phages. How did these appalling things come about? Surely there is nothing in that world as revolting and bad as a Phage. What is their purpose in a well ordered world? But now you are angry, because she was not mentioned. You are trying to move, aggressively. You still have energy and life to burn off. Slowly now, until you get the rhythm. That's it. Pull in the limb you consider to be in front of you on the left side, and you roll over into its space, the top limb comes down to replace it and the retracted limb becomes the back one on that side, that you now have to release back into position, and the back one rolls upwards to become the one on top. The right limb stays in place. Now repeat that process, but on the right hand side, and you have progressed one step. There! Well done! Did that burn off some of your anger? Well, keep doing it then, you are sure to feel better for it. In fact, now that you appear to have a rhythm going, you are slowly trundling across the great plain away from that naughty world where you were brought into existence. You are no longer an islander, you have become a plainsman. Well, albeit blind, disorientated, alone and using the force of your pent-up lividness and frustration to drive you on into the unknown, but still a plainsman.

While you roll on, we could continue to review the world you are leaving. How the pure water and sand pour continuously down the mountainside we have dealt with. Meanwhile in a contraflow, the

vine, being rooted in the sea at various points around the island, grows upwards from the sea towards the peak. As the island grows the trunks are lengthened with exposed root becoming trunk and the underwater root-tips digging down deeper. As the trunks climb higher up the mountain they become gradually thinner, their leaves and their fruit, the pods, become smaller, until near the top they are little more than a carpet of tendrils vainly reaching for the summit, but at every point there is an imperceptible growth. Now, what is of real interest, of course, is the pods. From some pods people are born, others produce food or fibre for clothes, others are used as counters by the Clerks and some, not good enough for anything, fall to the sand to be re-absorbed.

Both people and food are appropriate to their level on the mountain. For instance, the Aquatics, that are born and live solely in the sea, feed on the most creamy, fatty of pods that grow near the edge of the sea. These are essential to them to keep themselves afloat. All the people eat from their own level. No one would dream of changing levels, because all their natural needs are catered for best at their own level. So you have arisen, in this picture, as a special case. You have eaten pods from every level, but as you know - for you the Aquatics' pods were too fatty, the Athletes' pods were too meaty, the Squat Vine-keepers' pods were too stodgy but your pods were just right. Upwards, the Clerks' pods were too concentrated and the Mystics' pods were too alcoholic. That's why they were so burning, by the way. What can an ordered world do

with a rebel like you, but eject him. You think the Clerks are just amusing themselves? In reality, they are counting effects, planning strategies and judging the consequences of all actions on the island. The Mystics, also, don't just sit in a circle and sing, they are in a deep concentrated study, through contemplation and visualisation, of all events and trends on the island. Their thinking and feeling affects the attitudes and moods of the whole island and so influences the calculations of the Clerks. So, as an anomalous case, is it surprising you naturally had to go?

What effect do you think you had upon the others you came into contact with? What good did your presence do to the other Vine-keepers? Seeing you constantly flouting the rules? Seeing your lax working style which culminated in the birth of the Hand? It could have made them sloppy, eroded their confidence in the exactness of the system. Did you help the Clerks? They feel proud of their abilities and concentrate hard on achieving their accuracy and precision. You showed them that any fool can ape their systems. They could have felt devalued, with their work suffering accordingly. The Athletes took you into their group, but when you had squeezed them dry of sport, and eaten your fill of their pods, you turned your back on them. Even the Aquatics, who were good enough to show you how to float and invite you into their circle, could have been left feeling awkward and repulsive after your self serving treatment of them.

Don't get even more angry, now. You wanted to leave anyway, didn't you? Just keep rolling along.

Left, right. Left, right. That's it. So, let's now continue our talk about Phages. Your opinion of them is clear enough. In this perfect world, where the life-giving vine bestows its bounty throughout its length, Aquatics wallow and rub and grope around in the shallows, and Athletes compete and wrestle on the beach, and Vine-keepers run up and down the trunks tending to the pods, and Clerks endlessly calculate and plan, and Mystics sit in mysterious meditation, what vile intrusion is a Phage. Whether it has sat for ever, hidden, under a piece of vine or has just burst from a bloated body, its only purpose is to infect, poison and kill some unsuspecting person. To you, its existence is an outrage. Your mind is revolted and repulsed just from knowing of the existence of such an abomination. Is it a true living thing? Or is it just an encapsulated scrap of Death, torn off to compose an extra, random threat, thrown into the world for no real purpose?

Don't get too upset now, just keep rolling because here is a strange coincidence. Remember what a Phage looks like? Forget the needle with its lethal point, that is just a well-designed delivery system. The real part is the sac at the back end which is filled with the poison. Can you see one of the sacs now in your mind's eye? It's black. From the needle's connector, which is a little tube, it opens up to a triangle of three corner points which are themselves like little sealed tubes. The shape which it makes, as the Clerks taught you, is tetrahedral. A little black tetrahedron with four stumpy legs and a bag of poison inside it. Now, quite coincidentally,

surely, it must be said, that at the moment, as you roll along between the giant worlds that populate this plain, you look like a little black tetrahedral bag with four stumpy legs and, of course, your emotional state is quite poisonous... Well, fancy that? You certainly are rolling now, left-right-left-right-left-right, across the plain. You'll soon be completely clear of the shadow of your old world.

Not wishing to rub it in... but it must be said that there are quite a few similarities between you and a Phage, beyond the form. You are both a danger to the young and the weak and the frail. The Phages exist to attack their bodies, but you, by your wrong example, worked to pervert their minds. Both you and the Phages seemed to undermine the simplicity and beauty of the healthy development of the island. The Phages blindly, by randomly killing, but you, quite consciously, by confusing its straight-minded people. In that ordered system both of you were completely lawless. You have proved that you would no more obey an elder of your tribe or a Judge than a Phage would. Of course, unlike you, the Phages did actually manage to do something useful, remember? They killed the hand that would have killed you. If that can be called useful, that is? Perhaps the world would have been a lot better off without you, that little bit sooner? What we are off again with renewed vigour? Left-right-left-right... Anyway, they couldn't get rid of the Phages, but they have got rid of you. Left-right-left-right... That's it, you are well out onto the level plain now.

But aren't you tiring, now? You seem to be moving a bit more slowly than you were. Have you

spent all your rage and indignation? Are you being faced with your complete impotence in this situation? It seems you have almost run your course. Your insides have been mixed together and whipped smooth by the churning motion, your limbs have been reduced to stumps and your proud wings and skin have been savagely blackened, burnt and cracked and, after twisting you into that parody of a Phage, are now scaling and starting to fall away. Your energy is almost used up because you haven't eaten for days. Not that there are any such things as days out here on the plain under that continuously flaming sky.

What is left undone? What more do you want? Well, yes, there is, actually, one more thing to say. Phages, by attacking those not so quick-witted, helped the world to become a better place, because only the more canny were left to tend to the vines and pass on their knowledge. Whereas, your presence threatened to attack the cream of the people through their natural desire to improve their working practices. You were far more poisonous for the world than a simple Phage.

I'm only telling you how it was. In action and by result, you were definitely far worse even than the Phages. Ooops! We're off again. That's it, left-right-left-right...

You are completely exhausted, now. All you have left to burn off is your blind stupidity. It has carried you this far, but it is time to throw that into the fire as well to drive your muscles. Isn't it a shame that you spared no thought for a life beyond that place you have left? All you wished for was to get out of

there, and that you have achieved. Couldn't you have used a little of your energy to imagine for yourself a life out here to come into? No? Not you? What? What else is there you could possibly want? Who? Her? The owner of the sweet voice? But don't you understand that she is a spirit from the upper fire, and you are just the dross of the earth. What force could possibly bring you two back together again? Well, yes, that's true, she did make a pledge, she did promise to return.

It's almost over now. Your strength is fading. Everything that you possessed has been used to get you this far, and finally your strength is giving out. Left... right... left... right... right... right... right... right... You are going round in a circle now, unable to continue in a straight line, slowly screwing yourself into the soft soil. Right... right... right... right... You are upending gradually onto that stationary limb which is being drilled into the moist ground.

Nothing of your life's energy remains. Both the bad and the good, if there was any, have been consumed. Anger has gone, burnt off. Your desire to be with her again, as she, indeed, had promised, which sustained you all the way to this bitter end, was, as we see, in vain. Where is she? Having screwed yourself deep into the ground, your other three limbs are pointing impotently into the sky. All locomotion has ceased. It seems your time has come. More flakes of burnt wing and skin and sinew slide down to the ground as your three upper limbs, drawn down under their own weight, slowly droop and turn downwards until their tips burrow

lightly into the ground.

And that is where past, present and future join. Here you are in the now, and here you must necessarily stay.

So that was your life. From beginning to bitter end. As the blackened skin has fallen away, you have become a pure white ball supported on a pure white tripod, with a short central post. It would have been uplifting at this point to be able to say that you had given your best, unfortunately...

Finally, all is still.

EPILOGUE

Now, dear reader, we must avert our eyes. Those supreme moments of death or intimacy are not for spectators. We are not ghouls or voyeurs to revel in such sights. We must merely peep though our fingers, for we still need an acceptable conclusion to be appended to this history of our unnamed islander, so that we can properly close its account in our minds.

This then is what happened.

As gravity drew our hero's three upper limbs down to touch and rest in the soil of the grassy plain, and the now whitened remains of his fleshy parts which had made way for them settled in place,

all motion ceased. There was a sacred stillness, like that before a thunderstorm. His story had ended. He had ended. It was all over. In his last glimmer of consciousness, his only regret was the losing of his inner companion with the sweet voice.

Suddenly, there came a crack like lightning, exactly overhead, a wispy form spiralled speedily down from the upper fire, encircling his white, distorted body and simultaneously, with an equivalent crack sounding in unison, our islander's physical form split into two and yielded up his ghost. Up, that is, into the encircling arms of Her with the sweet voice.

His joy was total. Their joy was total. He was back with his beloved, and she, in turn, was back with him. As she had promised, she had returned. In spirit, they began to joyfully spin about, twisting and turning, dancing and cavorting, spiralling around each other in sweetest rapture within the sanctuary of his now detached central sphere. As they repeatedly withdrew to contemplate the other and then rush again into blissful union, their love-play and intimacy energised his decrepit body, which was once again home to them both. The hollowness of his supporting limbs began to draw up water and nutrients from within the rich soil of the plain and created a puddle in the bowl which had once been his pelvis. That precious orb, which had once been his head and ribcage began to turn, rotating in the rich pool of nutrients and goodness supplied by the limbs, while the point of severance from his lower body became a small hole in the sphere that with the rotation fell into and out of the

pool.

Their love, which has been tested and found true even unto death, will keep the waters flowing and the ball turning, while it grows steadily into a new world, with a new island within, and new inhabitants thereupon. Such is life. With Fire and Air above and Water and Earth below and Man, that dual quintessence, suspended between.

For, in the end... as every grandmother knows... it's only love that makes the world go round.

Under that Primal Power of Love, operate the two great universal forces, ***COAGULA et SOLVE,*** Fusion and Dissolution, Combination and Separation, which together evolve, sustain and extinguish all that exists, and *Microcosm* becomes *Macrocosm*, a Man becomes a World. For each man, each creature, is a seed containing the entire blue-print for a new world.

Deo gloria. Glory be to God.

THE END

Coda

Six Songs

Concerning

Love and Loss

FIRST LOVE

My love for you, My Love, dawned as did Earth,
Unformed and violent, stinging from birth,
Turning and burning and yearning for life,
Chaos rejected, prepared for the strife – ahead.

Primeval forces that shattered my world
Bit me, tore me, bled me, till now I
Want you, need you, love you, blinded I
Feed them, groom them, tend them, while as I
Feel my love for you engulf me,
I know I'll never be free.

Trapped by this entity,
This mind-rending entity,
This soul-searing entity,
I know that this entity is me.

My love for you, My Love, lives off my need,
Feeding upon me in ways long decreed,
Forming an image, in me, of your face,
How can I fight that, I give up the race - and let

Primeval forces that shatter my world
Bite me, tear me, bleed me, till now I
Want you, need you, love you, blinded I

Feed them, groom them, tend them, while as I
Feel my love for you engulf me,
I know I'll never be free.

Trapped by this entity,
This mind-rending entity,
This soul-searing entity,
I know that this entity is me.

But don't you see, My Love, I'm happy here,
Locked in this cage of love, I know no fear,
My mind and my will and my life recede,
Swamped by the swell from my heart's primal need
- you see,
All I can offer is my love, My Love,
Just my love, My Love.

GOODBYE

But here and now, you say goodbye,
You take my hand, you give a sigh,
You close your eyes to hide a tear,
And say those words, so hard to hear.

But when we met, while in the park,
With fallen leaves, and landscape stark,

The North-East wind, which blew so cold,
Wafted the sound of bells that tolled.

But we had fun, we were as one,
The words you said brought out the sun:
“I love you, I love you ... I love you.”

I thought our love would last for all eternity,
I thought our love could never end,
Yet you've found another lover,
And so, goodbye, my friend.

But I'm bewitched, beneath some hex,
Your heart's up front, back with your ex,
You turned me on, now switch me off,
I'm at a loss, though no van Gogh.

But feel my chill within your heat,
I'm frozen stiff, within defeat,
I've lost you, I've lost you ... I've lost you.

I thought our love would last for all eternity,
I thought our love could never die,
Yet you've found another lover,
And so, my friend, goodbye.

But I'm alone, love's not a game,
It's not your fault, you're not to blame,
My heart's wrung out, hung out to dry,

Without your love, I want to die,
Just let me die,
Darling, goodbye.

THE DANCE OF LIFE

Strolling one evening I found my way
To a small wood at the end of day.
Just as the sun set I saw a fair girl,
Draped in white silks that she graced with a swirl.

Tripping towards me she filled my head,
Enlivened marble with lips so red,
Eyes shining brightly with hues of the sea,
Eddying light that she washed over me.

Spiralling into twin pools of blue,
I held her to me with love so true.
Spinning and spinning we danced all night,
Phantom musicians just out of sight.

Onward and onward we carouselled,
Slowly my strength fed the one whom I held.
The dance of life swept us around,
Till I, exhausted, collapsed on the ground.

When I awoke it was late next day,

Nobody with me, she'd gone away.
I felt so weak as I lay 'neath the trees,
But as I trembled I called, “Come back, please.”

Darkness was closing when she appeared,
Banishing doubts that my weakness reared.
Filling my arms she was plumper by half,
And more alive for our choreograph.

Spiralling into twin pools of blue,
I held her to me with love so true.
Spinning and spinning we danced all night,
Phantom musicians just out of sight.

Onward and onward we carouselled,
Slowly my strength fed the one whom I held.
The dance of life swept us around,
Till I, quite dead, collapsed on the ground.

Now she has left me for pastures new,
Face flushed and rosy round eyes of blue.
Looking for others to drink of their life,
So sweetly ending all their mortal strife.

But she has left me a legacy,
So I wait for you, each night,
Beneath this tree.

WHERE IS SHE?

Where is she, my own bride-to-be, my golden-haired girl?
Yesterday, had so much to say, her head in a whirl.
Now today, gone away, they look me up to say,
Sit down lad, something bad, car in a crash.
Mystery, hit a tree, no reason we could see,
Felt no pain, quickly slain, lost to us in a flash.

Where are you, with scans of you two,
transforming my world?
Our baby, who'd make us two three,
from darkness was hurled.
Suddenly, you just could not be alive any more,
You have gone, your lives have moved on,
just jumping plans placed before.

Where are they, her people who pray,
yet lost everything?
Daughter, sister, granddaughter - wished her
all life could bring.
They're devoid, all is void, it's far too soon to grieve,
Lost in space, what's the race, too soon to leave.

“Bring her back, back on track,
just like it ought to be,
We can't cope, without hope,
please hear our plea...

Send us our angel back, refill this awful lack,
Please, Jesus, resurrect our sweetly shining star.
Oh, Jesus, give us our darling back,
refill this dreadful lack,
And gently resurrect our sweetly shining star.”

Where am I, I can't even cry, all functions have stopped?
Motionless, in frozen distress, for life that's been cropped.
I feel guilt, it's inbuilt, but also feel the shame,
Life in sin, did begin, but I'm to blame.

Harvest me, so we three can be our unity,
Meant to be, family, please hear my plea...
Take me away from here, into a higher sphere,
Where we can live together for eternity.
Somebody, lift me away from here, up to that higher sphere,
Where we can live together as a trinity,
As three, us three, we ... three.

STREAM OF TEARS

My man, my own man, I've known since we were young,
Just this man, this one man, with whom my life was strung.
Engagement, was natural, both families agreed,
The wedding, which followed, was socially decreed.

Gaily we entered into united life,
It gave me such pleasure as his devoted wife,
It made him feel grown-up, a proper little man,
Till one month went missing, and some issues began.

This thing came as such a surprise to him,
This thing came straight out of the blue,
This thing was, to him, my unthinking whim,
It hurt, as he slowly withdrew.

So, during those days that my belly grew,
For me, his concern seemed to shrink,
He spent more time back with his motley crew,
He spent more time back on the drink.

Now he's gone and I'm alone,
But he'll come back and I'll not moan.
He needs a break, I feel him so,
That when he must, I let him go.

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So once a week I see him off,
To spend the night with friends who scoff.
But I don't care, he's my man still,
I love him so, and always will.

Children's care eats up my day,
We're not in sync, not much to say.
I have a job and keep the house,
He has a job but not much spouse.

I feel his pain, regret his loss,
His ego smarts to come across.
We soldier on, it's such a shame,
He's locked up tight, within the game.

As children grow, up from below,
Life tends to slow, for us all.
He'll puff and blow, against the flow,
Feeling the woe, yet stand tall,
Try not to fall, or drop the ball, move at a crawl,
But must not call for my aid, or lose his grade,
In their game played with “poor Mum.”

Sits with his pipe, always some gripe,
Stereotype, like a brick.

His gender war, behind closed door,
I must endure, makes me sick,
More holes to pick, he needs a kick, more wounds to lick,
Lays it on thickeningly, sickeningly,
Motheringly, I must care.

Babies have flown, from the nest,
We are left more alone - perhaps best,
We have grown, I feel much less oppressed,
By his throne in the West, home feels more like my own,
We are blessed, with times for us unknown.

The menopause calls a truce,
Breaking down Eden's walls, to reduce
Nature's claws,
Where the need to produce offspring draws tight the noose,
Choking; but now withdraws, sets us loose,
And our frostiness finally thaws.

We are free from that stress, so our glands do decree,
Friendliness is now key, welcome back openness,
We agree - he says “Yes!” Could a finer word be?

Batons now pass, new athletes,
We see gather en masse, we take seats
On the grass. Son or daughter competes,

To surpass our own feats, before the hourglass,
Sand depletes, nurturing lad or lass.

Generations flicker by,
Holding expectations, gone awry,
Formations just of mist in the sky,
Temptations to defy. View the constellations,
Up on high, holding Man's noblest aspirations.

We can soar into space, to witness just how pure,
Full of grace, is this poor, exploited human race,
Who endure through disgrace such wrong concepts as "War."

I CHING

When our facts are lax, or we must move out without a scout,
Or we sit in doubt, as we dwell on that great world without,
From Creative Heaven to Yielding Earth, the trigrams dance for us,
To show the noble way to view this age-confounding fuss,
This age-confounding fuss, this age-confounding fuss.

Creative Heaven, Joyous Lake,
Rousing Thunder, Clinging Fire,
Abysmal Water, Gentle Wind,
Stock Still Mountain, Receptive Earth,
Revolve in relentless rebirth.

Taking up three coins, we hold the problem in mind, and cast,
Six, seven, eight or nine turns up, and makes one line hold fast,
Climbing thus, from beginning to top, six lines are to us, revealed,
Moving or fixed, we read betwixt, for Time, its truth to yield,
For Time, its truth to yield, for Time its truth to yield.

Creative Heaven, Joyous Lake,
Rousing Thunder, Clinging Fire,
Abysmal Water, Gentle Wind,
Stock Still Mountain, Receptive Earth,
Revolve in relentless rebirth.

I Ching – The Book of Changes
Chinese, dating from 1,000 BC
Translated into German by Richard Wilhelm
and into English by Cary Baynes

LIFE: UNBORN DEATH

Selene is having her lunch,
what follows is life-changing.

Oliver is haunted by dreams,
then they begin to materialise.

George's machine is a relic,
but its actions are profound.

Jimbo lives a life of leisure,
change is just biding its time.

Life is peaceful on the island,
but trouble lurks on the mainland.

Vine-keeper's life is set by rote,
unless one bursts loose.